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Is It All Dirty?

By

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B.A. University of Washington, Seattle, WA, 1998

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements


for the degree of


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Approved by:


Chairperson


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Visitors

I took the ride to Portland. These kids I sort of knew in Bellingham, where I was living, were going to Eugene and said they'd drop me off. It meant missing my shift at the Blue Dolphin, where I bussed tables and washed dishes, and since it was my third no-show, I knew I'd be fired. I probably should've stayed and worked, but I hadn't seen my friends for a few months. I was still thinking about moving to Portland. And anyway, my boss, Terry, a tiny man with false front teeth, had told me two days before that he'd spoken with my dad through his Ouija board. My dad died when I was four. I wasn't interested in what he or my boss had to say and I didn't ask what had transpired. Terry must have interpreted this as pain, or maybe he thought it was inappropriate, him bringing it up, because he dropped it. It was nothing, though—a little creepy on his part, sure, but I've never been too bothered by my dad's dying. Terry saying it just gave me an excuse for not showing up. It was something I could tell my mom during our next phone call. I'd been fired from two other jobs and it made my mom think she raised me wrong. When I told her these things, she'd go silent on the phone, and I hated listening to her measured breathing, while I thought of something to say. I knew it'd be easier to tell her about some weird boss than to try to explain that I just wanted to see my friends.

In Portland, it was a cloudy late-fall afternoon. It was windy. I waited alone on the porch of my friends' house. At least nine kids were living in the three-bedroom, and since there was always someone home to hang out with, I couldn't understand when no one answered the door. I stood staring longer than I should have at a color flyer duct-

taped to the door, advertising a bunch of bodybuilders, some of them holding swords, with rippled muscles and big mullets. They were those Christian bodybuilders who tour around breaking bricks and shit with their bare hands to show you about Jesus, and someone had drawn in long thin dicks that hung down to their feet.

I knocked again, then tried the door, but it was locked. I leaned over and looked through the window but couldn't see anyone. I sat on the couch that always smelled like raw chicken, began chain-smoking cigarettes, and mainly kept looking at a tattered Chuck Taylor pinched under the leg of a straight chair across from me. Drawn in black ink on the toe of the shoe was a pentagram. Around it on the floor were a few empty beer cans, some cigarette butts, the nub of a spent candle, someone's soaking-wet pants crumpled in the corner.

We always sat on the porch drinking, and for a while I felt fine. But after eight cigarettes I got sick of the chicken smell. I moved to the chair, but the pillow on the chair was wet, and water seeped through the ass of my pants. I moved back to the couch. I started to shiver and I had to dig into my backpack for my sweater and my jacket. My sweater was frayed along the hem, with big holes in the elbows that I hadn't gotten around to patching, and as I struggled into it, my thumbnail caught a piece of yarn and yanked a run down the forearm. It tore off my nail. I tried to tie the yarn so it wouldn't fray any further, and as I watched my orange-stained fingertips work, I started to doubt my decision to come.

The cold worked itself up my arms. I pulled my sweater sleeves over my hands, wedged them under my thighs, let the cigarette dangle from my lips as I smoked. I'd waited hours once outside a house in Seattle until finally I went around to the side and

fell asleep in the shrubs. This was nothing, I told myself. Someone would show up any minute and I'd feel stupid. It didn't help. I started to feel like something had come undone in me, and it was almost like having a bad time on acid, or being too stoned. Over and over, I imagined myself curled up on some stranger's floor, miserable, alone, or I was a creepy telemarketer, lurking around alleys and dive bars, living in a dingy room. I wanted some assurance that I'd be alright, though what exactly alright meant I wasn't sure, couldn't ever define, though I always imagined being six or seven again, curled on the couch with my mom, watching Donahue. I was twenty-one, and why that image always returned I have no idea. I'm not even sure it wasn't some dream. It was such stupid nostalgic shit, because it was probably just as horrible then, in the Sacramento suburbs. But the sky was draining of light and the thick dark clouds looked like they'd rain. The wind rattled the leaves on the dead lawn. The smell of hot food came from somewhere down the block, and I wanted to curl up inside my sweater.

I couldn't stand sitting in the dark much longer. But I'd convinced myself that if I went for beer I'd miss something, someone would come and leave and I'd be stuck on the porch for the night alone. I knew that some beer would help, but I just sat there tapping my feet, drumming my palms on my thigh, smoking. Then a girl standing on the bottom porch step startled me. I hadn't seen her come up the walkway, hadn't heard the crunch of the leaves. I muttered, "Fuck."

She laughed the nervous high laugh of a little kid and exposed a chipped front tooth. She stepped up the stairs and sat next to me, close enough that I could smell on her clothes something like lemon-scented dish soap. And she had this distant messed-up look, like maybe she'd taken too many drugs. I couldn't remember ever seeing her

around, which seemed strange, because I wouldn't have forgotten that look, or her face. She was beautiful, but she couldn't have been older than fifteen or sixteen.

"What should I know about you?" she asked, leaning back in the couch, sprawling her legs like she lived there. She wore black pants patched in the crotch, and I noticed something, a spider or a skull, tattooed just above the thumb on her left hand.

"I'm Tyler," I said. "I'm friends with the kids who live here."

She smirked. She pressed the toe of her leather shoe into the floor.

"What do you mean then?" I asked. I felt stupid saying it when I saw the way she sucked in her lower lip and started chewing on it. Her question begged a surprise, some fucked-up story, some confession—anything but asking her what she meant.

And for a minute I couldn't think of a thing, and then whatever I thought of seemed ridiculous. I played drums, I was on probation for stealing a case of beer, I was about to be fired from my third job, my mom weighed almost three hundred pounds and thought I was the greatest.

"I don't know," I finally said, and she waited, running her finger along the seam of the couch cushion.

"I live in Bellingham," I told her. "My boss said he talked to my dad through a Ouija board."

"Did they talk about the degrees of death?"

"I don't know," I said. I had no idea what she meant.

"Don't be boring." She started to play with the zipper on her black hooded sweatshirt, zipping and unzipping it an inch from her throat. It was like she was on speed

or something, but her pupils looked fine, and she wasn't tapping her feet or anything like that, wasn't smoking.

"Maybe they wondered if I'll ever amount to anything."

"You look kind of square," she said.

I was wearing my dark-green pants, my jacket, my ragged black sweater, but I think she meant my face. It looked too innocent and could've passed for that of an eighteen-year-old. There was nothing I could do about it. Anyway, I deserved being called a square for worrying that I wouldn't amount to anything.

"Who do you know here?" I asked.

"Everyone," she whispered. How she said it was weird, almost like it was a threat, or maybe she wanted me to understand they were really her friends. I wasn't sure.

"Why'd that make you quiet?" she asked. And for few minutes, the only sound was the wind, because I didn't know what to say.

"Why'd you come here?"

"To meet you," I said. I smiled awkwardly and hated that I'd said it. I was no good at that shit. I knew better. "Is there another house where they've been hanging out?" I asked.

"They're just not here now," she said, annoyed.

I fished out my cigarettes, took one, then handed her the pack. She lit her cigarette with a lighter she pulled from her pocket, and in the light from the flame I saw that her fingernails were bitten ragged. I saw how chapped her lips were, saw a burst of pink in the corner of her right eye, like a vessel or something had exploded.

"Where are you from?" I asked.

“It’s a boring question.”

I tore a lip of foil from the cigarette package and balled it up between my thumb and my middle finger, tossed it at the shoe, but missed. It disappeared into the darkness.

“You missed,” she said. “Do you miss your dad?”

“I was too young.”

“Does that matter?”

“People say it’s better to get it over with early, so you don’t remember much.”

“People are dumb fucks,” she said. She moved her cigarette to the hand furthest from me. “What are you supposed to be doing?”

“Bussing tables.”

“But you’re here.” Her voice changed, sounded softer, and for whatever reason she edged her leg closer to mine. Our knees touched. But I heard footsteps, the swishing of leaves, whispers; they were returning, finally, and I was supposed to be relieved that this would end, that I wouldn’t have the chance with this little girl. I looked up and it was a black woman holding her child’s hand, whispering something to him as they passed. The woman glanced at us, but in the dark I couldn’t discern her expression. I’m sure she was curious, wondering what were we doing on the porch of a darkened house in November. Probably she wondered if she should call the cops. She picked up her pace, tugged on the child’s arm to hurry.

“I think she likes us,” I said.

“It’s how we’ll end up.” She gave me this intense look, searched my face like she could get into my thoughts. And I knew I should’ve been somewhere else, should’ve been drunk with my friends in Bellingham. I should’ve told her I had to go, gone and

found somewhere else to wait. But instead I grabbed her hand. It was warm, like she'd been wearing gloves, and I clutched it tight. She pressed her thumb into my thumb, leaned against me, and I almost turned and kissed her.

"Why's that shoe under there like that?" she asked.

"The leg's probably short," I said, pointing my foot at the chair. "Should we get some beer?"

She let go of my hand like I'd offended her. She stood up and walked out to the sidewalk and didn't wait, just kept walking in the direction of the mini mart. I stuffed my pack between the wall and the couch. After half a block I caught up with her. It was a quiet dead street and we walked on in silence. But after another block, we turned onto the main road where a steady stream of cars drove past, washing us in their headlights.

"They're all done," I said. They were finished with work, going home to their families.

"I can't stand this," she said. She took my hand, wove her fingers between mine, and pulled me down a side street heading away from the mini mart. We walked down these alleys, past a few Dumpsters I'd gone through on occasions with my friend, Trevor. He was the kid I knew best in Portland, and he should've been with us, keeping an eye on me.

As we walked I thought of Bellingham. It was about the time that I would've started my shift. I could see my boss starting to fuss as he sensed I wouldn't show up, saw the five regulars who came in nightly for clam chowder and stayed for hours drinking beer. On the balcony overlooking the bay behind the restaurant I would've flirted with Gina, the older waitress, as we smoked during our break. I would've worked

until twelve, bought some beer with my tips, and stayed up until three or four drinking with my housemates.

“I should be starting my shift now,” I said again. We’d walked at least five blocks down the alley, and I had no idea where we were going.

“Later you’d be driving home,” she said. She stopped in plain view of anyone who turned down the alley, and we stood off to the side of a lit window that looked into the kitchen of a ground-floor apartment. She stared through the window at the kitchen table where a terrier was devouring a cube of butter from a little pink plate. She pulled me closer to the window until we stood only a few feet away, and the dog regarded us for a moment, then returned its attention to the butter.

The table was set for three. Behind it a large pot was on the stove, dishes on a drying rack, the refrigerator, and on the wall, framed, was an enlarged photograph of the terrier with a bandana tied around its neck, a frisbee in its mouth. When the dog finished, he rooted his nose into the checkered tablecloth, twisting part of the cloth into a large nipple, and he climbed down from the table and disappeared, probably waiting to be spanked, again.

“This is the kind of shit I see all the time,” she said, moving closer to me, clutching my hand tighter.

“Is this where you live?”

“Why would I show you that? Why are you so worried about home?”

“I’m not.” But I wanted to see who’d sit at the table, see if they were her parents, if they would wait for her. Maybe they were already waiting, sitting in the livingroom wringing their hands. I have your daughter, I thought. She’s mine. I felt sick for

thinking it, hated how much I wanted her. And maybe she sensed this or something, because she reached up and kissed me. Her lips felt like the dried shriveled skin of an orange and as I kissed back I thought I heard someone. I pulled away and looked around, but there was nothing, just the empty alley, the empty kitchen.

“You’re scared,” she said.

“We should go back.”

“You can’t.”

“To the house,” I said, and I shivered. “We should get back there.”

“But they’ll be there.”

“They won’t.”

All the windows were still dark when we returned and we stood for a moment together facing the door. Then she pulled her hand free and dug under the couch cushion. She found a key. She unlocked the door and went in without replacing the key, without gesturing that I follow—it was just like she lived there. I waited. I don’t know why I thought anything of it, because there were always a lot of people coming by the house, crashing for the night on their way north or south. No one cared. But I felt like an intruder. I had no place in their house.

I’m not sure how long I waited, maybe two minutes, and then I heard her call me—was I coming? I walked inside and it was pitch dark and cold and it smelled of stale beer and musty clothes. I tripped over a mattress on the livingroom floor and fell. I heard her giggle, though I couldn’t see her. I got up and walked on until her outline appeared in the far kitchen doorway. I followed her upstairs, into Trevor’s room, where

she turned on the light. And in the full light her skin was pale and she looked even younger.

The ceiling in Trevor's room slanted so sharply you could only stand up straight on one side of the room. The floor was covered with clothes, fanzines, little toy robots you'd get in Happy Meals, empty match books, empty packages of cigarettes, a dead fern. Next to the single mattress sat a tape player, a box of tapes, and the upturned shopping cart was still in the far corner, with a bunch of weird-looking bald dolls in the cage. Trevor had dumpstered them and painted their faces green. He was always digging through Dumpsters, collecting shit, and putting it together like that.

"What's in there?" she asked, gesturing at my backpack.

There was just another shirt, a pair of socks, a book, and my toothbrush. I dropped my backpack on the floor. "My sweater was in there," I said. I wanted to switch off the lights because I didn't like how young she looked, but it seemed square to want it dark. And anyway it would show what I wanted to do with her.

"Are you going to keep going?"

"I usually go home," I said.

"You could stay here."

We could start a happy family, I thought. I should've smiled to myself, but it was too much. You could stay here. Like already there was something serious, like we were almost going out. It wasn't anything like the normal drunken getting-together that went on when I'd visit someplace or when visitors would pass through Bellingham. And without thinking about it I reached out to switch off the light. I felt unsteady standing in Trevor's dark room and then she was clutching me tight around the waist, pressing her

face into my chest. She felt so small as we stood there, and I felt ashamed, holding her, being held by some desperate fifteen or sixteen-year-old. I let go.

But things had gone too far for me to be able to leave. I followed her to the mattress and we sat against the wall, under the slanting ceiling. She placed her hand on my thigh and I started tracing my pointer finger over her knuckles, then along the back of her hand. She pressed closer to me. I traced my fingers slowly over her wrist, but felt wrong doing it, and I stopped.

“They won’t find us,” she said.

“If they do?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

She leaned over and kissed me, but then she pulled away. “We could be here forever,” she whispered. She clutched me tight again and we began to make out.

I’d gone down on her when the door swung open and an instant later light filled the room. I looked behind me and Trevor stood in the doorway. He was wearing his ratty dark-blue winter coat with the fake-fur-lined hood up, but I could see that he was grinning—it wasn’t the first time we’d walked in on the other. His face changed, though. This look, almost of horror, flashed in his eyes. He glared at me, then her, and I followed his gaze to the deep thin scars on her left thigh, not an inch from where my cheek had been. On her chest and belly other scars crisscrossed in no discernable order. There were deep scratches crusted with scab along her ribs; and on her left forearm, in two places, were long thin bruises, fingers where someone had held her too hard. I saw a scar running up her wrist. And the look on her face when I reached it—her eyes were slits and her lips and chin quivered like she’d come.

The room went dark again. The door closed, and I listened as Trevor's footsteps descended the stairs. It sounded like he was walking extra slow, telling me to follow after him or something—at least that's what I thought. But I allowed her to push my head again between her legs. I pressed my thumb lightly into the ridge running down her thigh and my entire body trembled. I traced the tough scar with the tip of my thumb. I ran my thumb along another, thinner scar, and I clutched her bony hips and held them tight.

When we finished, she pulled Trevor's sleeping bag and blankets over us, and I could smell our work. I couldn't stand the thought of Trevor down there telling everyone what he'd seen, all of them already knowing what she was about. We'd have to walk down together, hang out and drink with them—then what? I wondered if I could leave with her at the end of the night, or if we'd curl up in some corner and sleep spooned, sharing someone's blanket.

"You could've stopped," she whispered. She rolled onto her side so her back faced me. "It's not my fault."

"I didn't say it was," I said. I stuck my head from the blankets and stared at the ceiling. I didn't know what to do, because I needed to go to the bathroom so bad that it hurt. It seemed wrong, though, standing up and getting dressed, but I had to. I slipped from the covers and put on my pants and my shirt. I stepped on something sharp and limped down the hall.

In the bathroom the tiled floor was cold under my bare feet and I avoided looking at the mirror. Tacked above the toilet was a picture, probably from *Time* or something, of Nancy Reagan looking down with concern at her bewildered husband. I stared at it while

I fumbled with my belt buckle, and then I looked down at myself, thinking there might've been blood on it. There wasn't. I sprayed piss all over the rim. I finished and sat on the edge of the tub, listening to the chatter of popping bubbles that sounded so loud, like it was gravel hitting a car window. And my skin started to crawl; on my thumb, I could still feel her scars.

When I returned, she was gone. The light was on and all her clothes were missing and the sleeping bag and the blankets were folded at the edge of the mattress. I looked back toward the bathroom, saw nothing, couldn't hear anything, and looked again at where we'd been. I turned off the light and stepped on a few things as I went to the low window. I knelt and looked out and there was nothing but the bare trees, the house across street with its lit porch and drawn blinds. I stayed there, clutching the window frame, and tried to listen for voices downstairs but heard nothing. I was afraid to leave the room, to face whoever was down there, but I knew I had to.

Trevor sat on the couch nursing a can of Pabst, smoking, flipping through a fanzine. The hood of his coat was still up and it sort of made me smile for a second, seeing him all bundled up, because he was always complaining about the cold. But I could tell, as I stood in the far kitchen doorway watching, that he wasn't paying the zine any attention, he knew I was standing there. I should've sneaked out the back, just took off, pretended that nothing had happened, pretended that he wouldn't tell anyone anything. It was too late, though. Just taking off would've made it worse, would've been even creepier. Somehow I'd see him again, or someone he'd told would come through Bellingham, or my friends in Seattle would hear that I'd fucked a messed-up little girl all full of scars, that I hadn't even been drunk.

I walked into the livingroom and sat near him on the couch. The couch was saggy and I sank into it. I leaned forward and took a beer from the half-case by his feet. I opened it and took a long drink.

“Where’d she go?” Trevor asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I went to the bathroom and when I came back she was gone.”

“What’s been going on in Bellingham?” He stared down his outstretched legs to his ragged canvas shoes that touched the edge of the mattress I’d tripped over earlier. Past the mattress was an old TV and atop it was an Olympia-beer clock with a glimmering lit waterfall on the face, and on each side of the clock stood a can of Olympia.

“Nothing,” I said. “It’s the same.” I tore the tab from my beer can and bent it between my fingers. I set the tab and the beer on the arm of the couch and took out my cigarettes, tossed one on his lap, and lit my own. “Is she going out with anyone?” I asked.

“No.”

“She knew where the key was,” I told him. I had nothing to do with this, I wanted to say. I was just waiting for you guys to get home. But I was betraying her, selling her out—and I hated Trevor for making me feel so guilty. I smoked the cigarette and dropped the butt into one of Trevor’s empties.

“Where is everyone?” I asked.

“She did most of it in here.” He pointed his foot at a brownish-red stain on the mattress near a blanket. “I had to take her to the hospital once.”

I wondered if everyone had been moving out on account of that, not stopping by anymore, and I no longer wanted to know anything.

Trevor finished his beer in a long drink, dropped the empty on the floor, and took a fresh one. He pried the tab slowly up with his thumb, then cracked it open with a quick jerk so it popped. It spit foam and some landed on my forearm. He sucked the foam off the top. It was like he was doing it all for effect, trying to remind me of the moment when he walked in and found us. Then there was a sound at the door and Trevor turned too quickly to see who'd come, but it was the wind, maybe, or her. And Trevor was stuck staring, hoping it would open.

"It's nothing," I said. I wanted to get so drunk then. I didn't have the guts to leave, but I wanted to go out and find her sitting on the couch. I sensed she was waiting, seeing if I'd come.

We finished the half-case and Trevor went into the kitchen and returned with a gallon jug of Carlo Rossi burgundy. He poured the wine into two plastic cups and set the jug on the floor, between our feet. And there wasn't much to say so we sat silently and drank cup after cup, waiting for someone to arrive, but no one ever did. No party developed. Neither of us mentioned wandering along the train tracks like we often did. I thought about it though, for a moment, saw us walking a stretch of track, sipping from quarts of beer, throwing empties bottles at the tracks and the abandoned buildings. But I kept quiet, and we just sat there, stuck.

It was almost dawn when Trevor slid off the couch and curled up on the hardwood, the crown of his head touching the mattress. His breathing fell steady and I knew he was done. I could leave. I stood unsteadily, almost puked, but it passed. I

covered him with a blanket and got my pack and walked out the front door. And as I stood on the porch for the last time I noticed that it had started to rain. I wasn't sure where to go. I walked out to the sidewalk and started to shiver.

Another Room

Eleven-ten, Monday morning, and Sam was already stretched across the king-sized bed in 2209. He'd just started to doze when the door creaked open. He jumped up and made like he was moving a chair. He turned and saw a man standing in the doorway, grinning. The man walked into the room like it was his own and rested a hand atop the television. He was at least half a foot shorter than Sam. He was stocky and his shoulders hunched slightly. His hair was short, parted to the left, and his skin was pasty, but his eyes glinted like he was in on some joke Sam didn't understand. He wore khaki pants, boat shoes, and a red polo shirt, looked to be in his mid-forties.

The man had to be some plain-clothed worker hired to keep tabs on the employees. Sam knew this happened more and more in the workplace and he wondered if he'd been caught. He smiled at the man, stood up straight, his heart pounding, and felt disgusted at how docile he became in the face of authority.

"I followed the cord in here," the man said. "Kind of like Hansel and Gretel."

Sam looked down at the orange cord snaking out the door. The open door, so that anyone could see them. He wasn't sure why that worried him.

"What are you up to?" the man asked.

Sam stuffed his hands into his front pockets. "Waiting," he said. He wasn't sure what he meant by waiting and he searched for some explanation. "The cleaner gets too hot sometimes." The orange and white machine stood outside the bathroom. It hadn't been used in almost half an hour.

“You look like Christian Laettner, Sam.” The man went to the cleaner and touched the back of his hand to the white metal body. He pretended to wince. He shook his hand as if he’d burned himself.

“Who’s Christian Laettner?” Sam asked. He touched his nametag. He felt stupid for being caught in the lie. It made him nervous that the guy had checked.

“He played for Duke in college. He played for the Pistons for a while.”

Maybe he played with himself. Sam smiled, but felt uneasy.

“What’s funny?” the man asked. “You didn’t play basketball?”

“I played in high school,” Sam said. “I played for a year at a community college.” Sam had never played much basketball. He didn’t care for sports. He’d been too gangly and awkward in junior high and had given up after the seventh grade. He only made it through half a semester of required courses at the community college.

“What position did you play?”

“I played center.”

“You look like a center,” the man said. “You’re tall—good shoulders.” He reached out and grabbed Sam’s bony shoulders. He gripped them firmly. He smelled of the same after shave Sam’s dad wore, and Sam could smell coffee on the man’s breath. And the beige walls, beige carpet, the beige floral-pattered bedspread, the dried flowers in a light-blue vase, the two paintings of the Olympic Mountains at sunset—all of it seemed brighter, uncertain. The light was shaky. The door was open. The man let go and Sam scratched his left arm. He exposed the tip of a pair of scissors his girlfriend, Melissa, had tattooed on his forearm a year earlier using a sewing needle and Indian ink.

“Let’s see it,” the man said.

Sam unbuttoned the cuff of his shirt and pulled up the sleeve. Melissa had been drunk, had done a poor job, and it looked more like a carrot.

“What’s it mean?” the man asked.

“It doesn’t mean anything.”

“Everything means something, Sam.”

Sam looked down at the scissors, then at the clock on the nightstand. It was eleven-thirteen. Melissa would be on her way to the café where she worked. And he was in 2209 with this guy. “I guess I like crafts,” Sam said. “I’m in a craft’s club.”

“Don’t be a bitch,” the man said, his voice tight, his eyes narrowed. “I work in a bank and I deal with bitches all day.” But then his expression softened and he extended his hand.

Sam’s face flushed. The back of his neck tingled. It took him a moment to realize he was meant to shake the man’s hand. He watched his arm extend, their hands clasp. He felt the firm grip.

“I’m Ron,” the man said. “Do you want to come up to my room for a beer?”

It wasn’t just a beer. Sam had been with a few boys, friends. Melissa had been involved. But a stranger, some older guy who smelled like his dad. Sam let go of the hand, walked over to the steam-cleaner, and grabbed the grip bar. Was immediately too aware of the squareness of his gesture. The scared little boy takes hold of his blankie. But he couldn’t seem to help it. “I should probably be getting back to work,” he said.

“Come work for me.” Ron grinned. He clapped his hands and held them together at his stomach. The gleam in his eyes—it was decided that Sam would follow him.

Sam didn't say anything, though he knew something was expected of him, a gesture, maybe just a word, a nod. He glanced down at his legs. The dark-blue polyester pants issued him during his orientation were too short and made his legs look like they went on forever. He became conscious of how absurd he looked in the outfit. It was stupid not to go, to see what might happen, but he couldn't bring himself to talk.

"Suit yourself," Ron said. He winked, nodded goodbye, and without closing the door he left.

It was probably better. There was no need getting busted over a creepy guy like that. But Sam stared absently out the door until a young couple walked past and glanced in at him. They smiled, looked away guiltily. Sam closed the door enough so that no one could see in and he returned to the carpet cleaner. He switched on the machine and the room filled with the angry sound of an empty garbage disposal. He hated the sound. It followed him, rang in his ears most days as he rode the bus home.

Sam began dragging the heavy machine back and forth, and as he worked he imagined what the bellhops must encounter. Executives luring them further into the room. Come set my bags over here boy. He imagined himself in the gold jacket and cap, pulling up the skirt of some rich woman's power suit. He was always getting himself turned on by this kind of shit. And he'd lost his chance for something real. He could've written about it, could've written a dirty story and sent it to some gay magazine. It was another dreary day at work when out of nowhere this guy walked into the room I was cleaning. He was tall dark and handsome, and just looking at him I felt a stirring in my polyester pants. The last line came to him: when we finished there were plenty of new stains to clean. Sam smiled. The end. But the middle?

He stopped cleaning, ashamed that he hadn't followed Ron to his room. His parents would be so proud: at heart their son was a good straight boy. And he'd done his boss well, done the hotel a mighty service by resisting a lecherous guest's advances. His boss had his arm around Sam's shoulder, congratulating the new employee of the month. Sam swelled with anger. He punched the metal part of the grip bar, tearing the skin from his knuckles.

"Goddamnit," he muttered, but it was lost in the noise. One of his knuckles began to bleed.

Twenty minutes later the pager he had to wear at work vibrated in his pants pocket. Someone had vomited, spilled grape juice. Once he'd cleaned fresh blood from the carpet after a man had beaten his wife. But Sam realized it probably wasn't a stain: he was busted. Ron had complained. Concocted a creepy story about being whistled at, all because Sam hadn't followed him. He'd get Sam fired for something he didn't do. Which was fine, in fact it was good. Though Sam knew that it wasn't. He'd never been fired from a job. He hated how much he feared that it would one day happen. Sam turned off the machine, went to the phone, and dialed his boss's extension. And his boss, Tim, told him that someone in 2518 had spilled cranberry juice and that he needed to take the spray bottle with the spot-cleaning solution, a bucket for hot water.

This was better than dragging the carpet cleaner back and forth in empty rooms. Sam liked the chance to see an occupied room, maybe talk to someone. But he was disgusted by his fear of being fired. He decided to take the guest elevator, though it was against employee policy. The elevator was empty. It was lined with mirrors. As it went up Sam had no choice but to watch himself. He was a scrawny twenty-two-year-old

clutching a bucket and a spray bottle, wearing a blue and white-striped button-down, high-water pants. What had Ron seen? Certainly not the basketball player, the center Sam had described. He made a little juke move, pretended to make a shot. He smiled at the ridiculousness of it. But Ron had still wanted him to come upstairs. A desperate man. It was probably Ron's stain, Sam realized as the elevator doors opened.

Sam knocked twice on 2518. "Carpet cleaner," he called into the door. I'm your carpet cleaner, Sam whispered to himself in an overly excited voice he'd heard on some low-budget car commercial.

The door opened and there Ron stood. He feigned surprise, opening his eyes wide. "What are you doing here?" he asked. He grinned.

"You spilled something," Sam said, trying to sound like he didn't care that he'd been lured up to his room. Like he was used such tricks. But seeing Ron again his stomach knotted. Something had been set in motion that he felt was out of his control.

"Come in," Ron said. "You've got your bucket and spray bottle."

Sam edged past him, into the room, and heard the door close behind him. The click registered in his mind. He was closed in. The room was clean. There were two double beds and on the nightstand between them a travel clock next to the digital clock the hotel provided. It was eleven-forty. It was eleven forty-three. There was a *Time* magazine on the far bed. A towel draped over the straight chair by the desk, and a brown suitcase upright in the open closet space where a suit hung in its bag. No stain on the floor.

"Do you want a beer?" Ron said. He went to the little refrigerator and took two bottles of Budweiser and handed Sam one. "This is where you're supposed to be now."

Three seventy-five apiece: Sam knew from price list. He took the beer and scanned the floor again but saw nothing. He smiled at Ron because he had no idea what else to do. Here was his chance, though. His story would be written. I was so surprised when the door opened and there stood the beefcake who'd come into the room I'd been cleaning earlier. Just looking at him, I started to get hard.

But it seemed less funny with Ron standing next to him, because Sam knew that if he opened the beer something would be required of him. He could go back and clean more carpets. At five he'd take the bus home and get stoned with his girlfriend. They'd watch TV and she'd tease him about this and that and they'd go to bed. The next morning, back to work. Sam twisted off the bottle cap. He tossed the cap into the empty garbage can and the liner bag ruffled. He took a long drink, wanting to show that his earlier concern had been ridiculous, that he wasn't some square in silly work clothes.

Ron went to the window and pulled open the curtains. "Beautiful Seattle," he said. Sunlight glared off the windows of the surrounding skyscrapers. It was mid-July and between the buildings, the Puget Sound glittered in the sunlight. On the water, the ferry, the sailboats.

"Is this your first time here?" Sam asked.

Ron smiled. "Was your team any good?" he said.

For a moment Sam had no idea what was being asked of him, but he remembered the basketball. He was the center. "We finished second every year I played," he said.

"But you started?"

"Not my first year." Sam looked again for the stain. "I cleaned blood once from a carpet after some guy hit his wife."

“You liked my little ploy?” Ron asked, grinning.

But that wasn’t what Sam was trying to say. What was he trying to say?

Somewhere deep down did he want to be the red stain on a carpet, some crumpled figure raped and left to sneak from the hotel, to then get along with an understanding that verified the uselessness of his life?

Ron undid his belt. He slid his pants and his boxer shorts down his legs. He was erect, not especially large. His legs were smooth and much thinner than Sam would’ve imagined. And with his eyes Ron seemed to tell him that all this had been determined earlier, in 2209, or even before that, maybe in the morning, when Sam got out of bed. There was no reason for Sam to worry, because he was doing right. He was doing something.

Ron sat down on the edge of the bed and motioned for Sam to join him. “Hold my leg,” he said.

But the windows—anyone could see inside. Ron didn’t seem to notice, or didn’t care. Probably the windows didn’t matter. The sunlight’s glare would obscure everything, and who cared anyway? It wasn’t like someone able to see in would know he was an employee. Even if they did. Sam sat down. He held his beer in his left hand and placed his right hand on Ron’s thigh. It was warm, moist.

“This is fresh,” Ron said, touching Sam’s knuckles.

“The cleaner’s fucked up.” As if that would explain it. And as he sat there he couldn’t help imagining his boss walking in and finding him there.

“What was your best move?” Ron asked. He began masturbating.

Sam watched for a moment. He hadn't been in the room but six or seven minutes. He looked away. "I had a hook shot."

Ron placed the hand he'd been using atop Sam's hand and clenched it over his knee. "You're a center," he said. "Hold it like a center." He let go and Sam kept a firm grip.

"What number did you wear?" Ron asked. He began moving faster.

"Fifteen."

"What were your weaknesses?"

Sam searched for something to say, but for a moment his mind was blank. He didn't really want to go on, feared his lie would be discovered, but he was getting Ron off. "I guess I never took it that seriously."

"That's too bad," Ron said. He sucked in a sharp breath. "What else?"

"I wasn't a team player."

"A team's not always a bad thing," Ron said. "Tell me about your favorite moment."

A favorite moment. Sam supposed that there was no story but the last-second shot, the buzzer beater. But somehow that seemed depressing, because how many last-second shots had Ron heard about? Which seemed weird, to consider it like that. Sam realized Ron had done this before. The ease with which Ron had taken off his pants. The questions, and wanting Sam to hold his leg harder.

Sam was somehow jealous, disappointed. "It really had nothing to do with me," he said. He noticed their reflection in the television screen. Our little show. A rerun. He pointed.

“Just go on,” Ron said, jerking his knee, annoyed.

“It was the fourth quarter,” Sam said. Of course it was. “It didn’t even matter though, because we had no hopes of a post season.” He watched their reflection in the TV, noticed that Ron’s eyes were closed, his face was balled up tight. “We were playing Northridge,” Sam said, surprised he remembered the name of the rival school. “We’d been up all game.”

“And they were your nemesis,” Ron said. He leaned down and dug a handkerchief from his pants pocket.

“Yeah.” The interruption annoyed Sam, but it also seemed strange that he cared. He took a drink of beer. “They always had us, and as usual they made a surge at the end, and with like thirty seconds left they took the lead by one, but then we scored a two-pointer with ten seconds left.”

Ron’s motions became more frantic, and Sam sensed Ron needed more time. Sam took another drink of beer. He loosened his grip on Ron’s thigh, then again held it firm. Kneading. He needs me.

“There were no timeouts,” he continued. “They just ran up the court and this kid, this short kid with a crew cut, tried to make a jump shot and I jumped too, my arms outstretched, and I tipped it. I just got a fingertip on the ball, enough so it didn’t go in. I mean, it might have missed anyway, on its own.”

“But that’s the center,” Ron whispered. He came into the handkerchief and squeaked like an injured cat. He shuttered. He squeaked again, more softly, and exhaled. His shoulders went slack and his hands shook. His face loosened and he stared off at the straight chair.

Sam felt it, like some contact high. And it was like someone opening a sauna door. The entire room seemed to exhale, seemed to grow large around them. The muscles in Sam's back relaxed and he let go of Ron's leg. He rested both his hands in his own lap, and he felt the beads of sweat trickle down the side of his ribs.

"Jesus," Sam said.

Ron took quick breaths, his body still shook faintly. After a minute, he folded the handkerchief and placed it at the far edge of the bed. He was going soft, but made no move to cover himself. They just sat together dead still.

"I could get you fired," Ron said. His voice was cold, flat.

A joke. It had to be. And Sam searched Ron's face for some sign, a faint grin, but Ron's face didn't change. Sam looked down at his scuffed leather shoes. There was a slice in the left toe and he rubbed the sole of the other shoe over it.

"This job means nothing," Sam said.

"Sure it does." Ron stood up, bent down, and collected his pants bunched around his ankles. When he'd secured his belt, he dug a well-worn wallet from his back pocket. He took some money from it and handed it to Sam. The money felt damp, and Sam stood up, stuffed the bills into his front pocket. He dropped his empty bottle in the garbage. He picked up his bucket and his spray bottle.

"You're scared now?" Ron asked.

"No." Sam said. He understood nothing that was going on.

"You should keep an eye out for your boss." Ron went to the door and opened it.

"You couldn't lie your way out of a bag."

“Goodbye,” Sam said, his voice shaky. He stepped into the hall and heard the door close behind him. Then the beige walls, the tan trim, the cream-colored carpet. Ron creamed. Something seemed to move in his periphery and Sam started. It was only a tray, though, outside a guest’s door. He exhaled. He wondered if Ron was watching him, but he could see the light in the peephole.

Sam walked quickly past the elevators and slipped through a door into the stairwell. When the door closed the click echoed, sounded like it had come from somewhere below. He looked down between the flights of stairs but couldn’t see the bottom. He sat on the top step and began running his thumbs along the grooved metal edge. “The center,” he whispered aloud. He saw Ron’s face just as he came. That strange squeak. Then the money. He fished it awkwardly from his pocket. There were two twenties and a ten—fifty bucks for a story, for holding a guy’s leg, telling him a story.

The swish of pants passed in the hallway and Sam shot up, stuffed the money in his front pocket. He hurried down three flights, his footsteps echoing, and then the hallway, the long stretch to 2209. He kept waiting for Tim to emerge from a room, holding his clipboard. But then he was at the door, slipping the passkey into the slot. The light turned green—the click. He turned the handle and stepped inside. He was safe. He sighed. He set the bucket by the door and went to the carpet cleaner.

Sam worked straight through for the rest of the day without dozing, without watching any TV. He didn’t stop for lunch. In 2212 he felt the pager go off again, but when he checked it hadn’t. And again he felt it vibrate in 2216 but it was nothing.

At five, Sam lugged the cleaner to the basement and stowed it with the mop buckets, the brooms, the tile buffer. As he passed the house cleaning office, on his way to the employee changing room, he stole a glance through the doorway. His boss sat at his desk thumbing through papers. He looked up and smiled at Sam.

Like most days, Melissa was sitting cross-legged on the couch watching a rerun of *The Simpsons* when he returned home a little after five-thirty. The couch was under a loft they'd built for the bed and since she was sitting up straight, he couldn't see her face. He could see the *Playboy* he'd stolen from a maid's cleaning cart the day before. He'd slipped it under his shirt when his shift ended. The magazine sat next to her. Drew Barrymore posed naked in the issue, and Melissa had a big crush on Drew Barrymore.

"Did you get anything good?" she asked. She wore faded black denim jeans and a black tee shirt torn in the shoulder.

"You picked up," Sam said.

"I cleaned."

The coffee table's top was no longer hidden under junk mail, coffee mugs, empty packages of cigarettes, cassettes, compact discs, fanzines, and chipped porcelain plates. Their clothes had been shoved into the cardboard boxes they used as dressers. In the corner by the door were all the heads she'd made from paper-mâché and wire, flaking and falling apart. And he'd come home half a hooker or something. Except it wasn't anything like that. He'd only followed orders again, like always. But that wasn't exactly it—he'd accepted the beer, he didn't have to stay. It was his story, his tipped shot that made Ron come.

“This is the one where they go to Australia,” Melissa said. She was twenty-one, tiny, and she liked TV.

“I’ve seen it,” he said. Half a hooker, though. It was stupid. But it still seemed she should’ve have noticed something different in him. They’d been together a month shy of two years.

Their studio apartment was stifling hot and Sam stripped down to his boxers and his tee shirt. He left his clothes piled by the door. His legs were thin and pale, his feet white and wrinkled from being so long in his sweaty socks. Basketball socks. He sat down next to Melissa, took the *Playboy*, and began flipping through the pages.

“I think the maid knows that it was me who took it,” Sam said. “I think she’s Russian or something.”

“Don’t they call them house attendants now?”

“That’s the guy who changes light bulbs. He brings people ironing boards. They call the maids housekeepers, but it’s the same thing. It’s not like she can do anything—she’s not going to the boss about it,” he said. “How would you like to have these?” He held the magazine up, showing her a woman with enormous silicon breasts. They were absurd breasts, but they still turned him on. He closed the magazine and tossed it to the floor.

“She was probably going to give it to her husband or brother or something.”

“You probably jerked off to Drew Barrymore today.”

“She sounds stupid,” Melissa said. “But she is foxier than you.”

“And she can start fires.” Sam said. But he’d done something too. Fuck it, he thought. “I made fifty bucks today.”

“Fifty Bonus Bucks?” Melissa asked. The hotel had an award system where employees were issued Bonus Bucks if they did an exemplary job. The phony money could be used to purchase items such as wineglasses, coffee mugs, bathrobes, towels, telephones, all bearing the hotel’s logo. With enough saved up, one could purchase a paid day off. It was a joke between them—how many Bonus Bucks Sam could earn.

Melissa took a pack of cigarettes from the coffee table. “Sam,” she began in a deep voice meant to mimic his boss, “you cleaned those carpets with some righteous vigor today. It’s not gone unnoticed.” She giggled as she handed him a cigarette.

Sam wanted to remind her that she worked at a café slinging coffee and sandwiches, sucking up to customers all day, but he didn’t feel like fighting. He hated how easy she could get to him. He fished the money from his pocket and tossed it on the table. He noticed that their clock, with a three-dimensional kneeling Jesus on the face, had stopped running. “The clock’s stopped,” he said.

“He needs some juice.” Melissa leaned forward to ash, and Sam saw the blue of her panties, her exposed lower back, the fuzz of faint hair. Usually he’d slide his hand down her pants then. The little goose. It was their game.

“This guy showed up in a room where I was napping,” Sam said, looking down at his hands. “He said I looked like some basketball player. We talked for a while but it got weird and I told him I needed to get back to work.”

“Weird?”

“He said I should work for him.”

“Work it,” Melissa said in the low voice of a DJ.

Sam ran his free hand through his hair. He pressed his palm into his right eye. He inhaled from his cigarette.

“I’m joking,” she said. “Jesus.”

“Maybe fifteen minutes later he had me sent to his room to clean some stain that wasn’t there. He gave me a beer and kept flirting, until finally he asked if I wanted to make fifty dollars. I probably should’ve just left then, told him to fuck off or something, but it sort of excited me—not like I got all hot or anything, but it was messed up and crazy. I was at work. He was some business man, said he worked in a bank.”

Sam finished his cigarette and snubbed it in the ashtray. Melissa had the usual grin on her face as she stared at the TV. It felt strange trying to recount the story, somehow it sounded inappropriate in their apartment while they sat on the couch like always. There was no way he could explain that energy when Ron came, that moment when the room exhaled, or how someone could get off by listening to such a story.

“I had to tell him some story about playing basketball in high school and hold his leg while he jerked off. But it got all charged, like something happened.”

“He didn’t let you get in on the fun?”

“I told him I tipped a shot that would’ve beat us. It was pretty fucked up, how excited he got over my story. But I got fifty bucks.” It wasn’t about the money, though. He hadn’t even expected to be paid.

“We can go out to dinner,” Melissa said.

“Something like that.” Sam took another cigarette. He wished he hadn’t told her. It all seemed cheap, fake, hearing it retold like that.

After a moment, she asked, "And he came?" She was trying to make up with him, and he had to answer or she'd say he was sulking.

"Yeah," Sam said. But answering the question he felt proud. "He totally gushered."

"Gushered?" Melissa giggled.

"You know what I mean."

"Like how I orgasmered last night?"

"Sure," he said. It bothered him how little she'd reacted to his story, like it was nothing at all. It was usually like this. Melissa was never surprised, at least she never showed it. And he hadn't even mentioned Ron's face when he came or the squeak that escaped his lips twice. How weird it sounded. Sam hadn't explained he'd been almost envious of it, because he couldn't imagine what it would be to come like that. But any such talk would be dismissed. Big death, she'd say. The guy probably lost ten days or something. Melissa had read about how a bit of one's life force was lost when they came. It was shit. But maybe she was just jealous it was he and not she who'd held Ron's leg, anyone's leg, or maybe she was a bit hurt, thinking that he'd cheated on her.

"Did you eat at work?" Sam asked. She had. He went into the kitchen and prepared himself two packages of Top Ramen. He poured the steaming noodles into a metal bowl and returned to the couch. The news came on.

When he finished eating, Sam put the bowl under the table and took the glass bong and a bag of pot from the bookshelf and he and Melissa got stoned. They leaned back in the couch and watched the news like usual. On the screen a young newscaster, a woman with short sandy-blond hair, reported a shoot out that had left three dead. The

newscaster's face was tight and her eyes seemed to bulge out, brimming with the terror she was trying to convey. You're phony, Sam thought. He hated the phony concern, the terror, that plastic face.

"Imagine going out with someone like that," he said. "Imagine waking up to that face."

"You can make another fifty tomorrow," Melissa said. "You can tell him about playing on the football team."

"I guess so," he said. He felt sick. That's all she thought it was—fifty bucks. He sat up and massaged his neck with both hands. "I'm going to lie down."

Sam climbed the two-by-four steps to the loft. He crawled to his side of the bed, much more stoned than he cared to be. He stacked Melissa's pillow atop his and lay supine, staring at the ceiling not three feet from his face. He began to sweat and his heart beat faster than normal. He closed his eyes. Outside their apartment he could hear traffic and from the TV a man talked stoically about Ford trucks. He imagined the man, some guy in a V-neck sweater and boat-shoes, standing at a microphone in some secluded room, giving it his heart. Ford toughness. Going home to his wife thinking about Fords while he fucked her. Or you could just end up like Ron. It would be weird, but there was no way Ron could've believed Sam played basketball. It was almost sad, trying to stretch the imagination that far. But he supposed it was no different than the *Playboy*. The fake tits. But tipping the last-second shot. And worrying that Ron had heard too many last-second-shot stories, so you go and tip it, trying to be different.

Sam saw himself one in a line of young boys, the line so long it stretched out the door of the hotel room and down the hall. On the bed sat Ron. He was wearing a cape.

Regal Ron. Dark Ron, the sorcerer. Sam giggled. This time, though, the boys, blank-faced, were sitting on Ron's lap doing the work for him, one after the other. Ron came into tissue after tissue. Again and again.

Then Sam was tipping the shot he'd described. He wore red shorts and a red basketball jersey and there was some guy going for a jump shot and Sam leapt up. The ball grazed his fingertips. The shot missed, the crowd roared, and Sam threw his arms into the air, pumped his fists. Basketball. He'd be lifting weights next.

There was something messed up about Ron, how he'd checked the carpet cleaner to see if he'd been lied to, and saying that about getting Sam fired. It frightened Sam as he lay there with his eyes closed. His heart pounded, he could feel sweat dripping down his side. There were consequences he couldn't yet fathom. The thing would haunt him. He'd stolen a *Playboy*. And yet he liked the spirit of someone who would follow a cord into a room to see what he'd find. But Sam saw his boss waiting when he walked through the employee entrance the next morning. The whole thing would be turned horribly on its head. It was all Sam's doing. He'd seduced Ron, forced himself upon some suspecting guest.

Sam opened his eyes, stared at the ceiling. It was stained from cigarette smoke and it looked like skin. He was scared. He didn't want to be alone.

"Maybe we should do it," he called down from the bed.

"Only if I can be a volleyball player," Melissa said after a moment. She switched off the TV and Sam heard her rummaging through their box of cassettes. And though she said it with plenty of sarcasm, his fear left him. He again felt proud, because on the couch she'd been imagining his day at work.

The housekeeping office was alive. It was eight o'clock the next morning and most of the housekeepers crowded around the boss's desk, waiting impatiently for their room assignments. Others hunched over the boxes of shampoo and soap, filling the large pockets of their smocks with the toiletries to restock their carts. None of them acknowledged Sam. The Russian woman whose magazine Sam had stolen stood stone faced by a rack of white button-downs. Sam couldn't help but glance in her direction and she glared back. Had she told the others, the ones he saw her talk to in the cafeteria? He walked past her, his eyes downcast, and waited in the far corner, by the sewing machine where sometimes a plump seamstress sat.

The housekeepers filtered out of the office, shaking their heads at the lists they held. The room quieted and it was only Sam and his boss.

"That guest whose stain you cleaned left a message on my voice mail," Tim said. He looked up at Sam. His thick face betrayed nothing, and he seemed to be trying to detect some guilt. He ran finger and thumb down his mustache. "He said you were a good help. He complimented your work." His boss winked at Sam.

"That's good," Sam said. But it was all some joke. The wink: his boss was waiting for him to buckle.

"I'll give you ten bonus bucks."

"That's cool." But it wouldn't even buy a coffee mug. He realized he wouldn't be fired. If you only knew, Sam thought. And he wondered if he'd be assigned the twenty-fifth floor and, if so, would Ron still be there. Would he be paged again to clean another stain? Another stain in 2518, Sam. Guy's got the dropsies.

His boss handed him the play money and the list of rooms. “Don’t spend those all in one place.” He laughed.

“Of course not.” Sam laughed, felt disgusted. He walked out of the office, walked down the hall lined with plaques of employees-of-the-month. He checked the list. The eighteenth floor. Seven floors down. Sam wondered if Ron would come find him again?

Sam lugged the cleaner up to 1817. A fine year for revolt, he thought, though he had no idea any grand revolts took place then. It was a just joke he’d made too many times. A fine year for Merlot, for strike breaking. He’d been in too many rooms. He knocked to make sure it hadn’t been mistakenly listed unoccupied. When no one replied, he entered the room and set to work, wondering how long before Ron sneaked up behind him.

But after finishing 1817, 1818, and 1820, Ron hadn’t shown. Twice Sam had checked his pager, again thinking he’d felt it vibrating. He was in 1823, sitting on the bed staring at the orange cord that again led to the hallway. Just like the day before. There was always the phone—he could call, he could always hang up. We’re conducting a survey, Sir, can I ask you a few personal questions please. We’ll have phone sex. Sam went to the phone, grabbed the receiver, but almost immediately replaced it, realizing his stupidity. But still he had to do something. Just go up there and knock, but then what? I have another story, and it’s even better, I swear. Sit down.

Sam went into the bathroom and masturbated, but it did no good. When he’d finished he stared at himself for a long time in the mirror. He was nothing to Ron. He returned the room, restless as before. He moved his things into 1824. It was another

room, sterile as the last. But it didn't matter how safe they made the interior seem. Sam made it look like he'd been working and he left. He took the stairs and climbed the seven flights, scared, but knowing that if he ran into Tim he would tell him he couldn't find the spray bottle, maybe he'd left it somewhere on the twenty-fifth floor.

There was no sign of Ron. He was at some bank flirting with bank tellers, asking them about basketball. And Sam had gone to find him, walked past his room, willing that the door would open, that Ron would invite him inside. He returned and cleaned the carpet, then another. He went to the cafeteria for a late lunch, but he could finish only half his cheese sandwich. He drank two cups of coffee and became jittery, more anxious. Was sweating again. He had four rooms left and would have to work hard to finish them.

But at a quarter to four he'd only cleaned two more carpets. He'd twice left and walked past 2518, but each time there was nothing, no sound of TV or a running shower when he stopped to listen. Ron's gone.

Sam was in 1810, flipping through the channels, unable to focus on anything. It seemed impossible to work. He left the room and again climbed the stairs to the twenty-fifth floor. 2518. He heard television laughter and without thinking he knocked. A moment later it registered—he'd knocked. His felt it on his knuckles. He stepped back, but didn't leave. The sound of footsteps approached and Sam stared into the eyehole, saw it darken, but nothing happened. He knocked again, but nobody answered.

Sightseeing

His half sister, Rachael, stared strangely at her white Nissan Sentra, like she wasn't sure it was hers. She kept messing with the zipper on her purse. Jackson had never seen her wearing jeans. He hadn't seen her in a year. And her wide thighs—he could still feel the new largeness of her body when they'd hugged at the gate.

“You should let me drive,” Jackson said, and he smiled at her, but she didn't notice.

“Don't be like Mom,” she said.

Their mom had mentioned the cold tone in Rachael's voice, but he figured it was just the two of them never getting along. “What's that mean?” he asked.

“This control thing.”

“You taught me how to drive,” he said. She had, when she visited the previous spring. It had been Rachael's idea. He'd only been fourteen at the time. “I was just offering,” Jackson said. But he still wanted to drive. He was fifteen and their mom wouldn't let him get his permit. On the plane from Ashland, Oregon, watching the mountains below him fade into the dusk, he'd imagined speeding down the interstate, weaving in and out of Seattle traffic. He imagined car chases, imagined outrunning cops.

“What if you get pulled over?” She dug the keys from her leather purse.

“Just say that you're sick. Say you're on medication.”

She drew in a breath. “That's what she's been saying?”

“She doesn’t say anything,” he said. It was a lie. He’d been sent by their mom because Rachael had quit calling home and no longer returned emails. She’d moved into some basement. It was her dad. While driving Jackson to the airport, their mother again blamed Rachael’s dad. He wasn’t grounded. He had no sense of togetherness. Rachael needed Jackson to remind her of foundation, of family love and strength. Their mother would’ve gone herself except that Rachael was always resisting her.

“Mom’s the one messed-up,” Rachael said.

But Jackson had seen a few pictures of Rachael’s dad. He was a tall thick man with a massive mustache, long hair in a single braid, and a scar on his chin. He drove truck for a timber company. Jackson didn’t like that his mom had been married to him. But he liked Rachael, and he figured their mom was overreacting.

“We should go,” he said.

He opened the passenger door first. “Madame,” he said. He smiled again, but Rachael didn’t respond. She just sat down in her seat.

Then he was in the driver’s seat, stretching his legs and pressing his feet against the pedals. He examined himself in the rearview mirror. His hair was messed up. He feathered it back, then adjusted the mirror. Rachael took a pen from the dashboard and started chewing on its end.

“It’ll be fine,” Jackson said. His voice sounded too compassionate, consoling, and hearing it confused him. He’d meant that she shouldn’t be nervous. He’d do fine. He stuck the key into the ignition, turned it, but then the car was running and he started to worry. He hadn’t driven in a year, had never driven in the city, in the dark, in traffic. Had never gone faster than forty-five. He put on his seatbelt.

“You should put on your seatbelt,” he said. He waited until she did. He backed slowly out of the parking spot. He put the car in drive and he clutched the wheel tightly with both hands. His palms were clammy. Their mom would go crazy if she knew he was driving. She sold life insurance. Jackson imagined a wreck, the phone call.

The parking attendant in the booth was missing part of his left ear. He leered down at Jackson as he snatched the three dollars. Knew Jackson was only fifteen, and Jackson imagined a call to the police, imagined being pulled over, hauled off to jail. Jackson thanked him and drove forward. “Dick,” he whispered. He looked in the rearview mirror to see if the attendant was on the phone, but another car had arrived. He was safe. He switched on the windshield wipers. He switched on the stereo again and a man’s deep voice boomed mid-sentence over a slow-jam beat, “...is a booty call. Calling all ladies. Thursday night is lady’s night. I repeat: this is a booty call.”

“What the hell’s that?” Jackson asked. He looked at Rachael and began to veer into the other lane. Rachael fumbled with the knob until she found Led Zeppelin. *Black Dog*. Jackson turned the volume up two notches. He was the black dog, the wizard.

Rachael pointed that he should switch lanes. She kept chewing on the pen. He followed her directions until they reached the onramp to the interstate. He accelerated and his stomach dropped and he clutched the steering wheel tighter. But the traffic was lighter than he imagined and he had no trouble merging. It was too easy. He brought the car to sixty-five, nudged it up to sixty-seven.

After maybe ten minutes, though, Rachael took a pack of Marlboro Lights from her purse. She pressed in the car lighter and drew the cigarette to her lips. She wouldn’t look at him. Instead she reached for the knob of the lighter too soon.

And it was stupid to get mad that she smoked. Jackson dropped a hand to his lap to show her he didn't care. But he kept glancing at Rachael's fingers clutching the cigarette, lit by the stereo's glow. He couldn't remember her ever smoking when she lived at home. It wasn't right. He was the family fuck-up. He smoked cigarettes and sometimes he smoked pot and he cut class and he stole candy bars and *Hustlers*.

The city appeared, bright against the black sky. Gray clouds curled around the tops of the skyscrapers. He wondered why they left the lights on in the buildings. Someone had to be having sex in one of them. Back home he cleaned the law office where his mom's friend worked, and sometimes he'd dig through the lawyers' desks. He'd found a stack of *Playboys* and some colored spearmint-flavored condoms. He pointed at the tallest building. "Have you been in it?" he asked, on edge, because as they neared the city center the traffic was heavier. The rain fell harder.

"No."

"Which one do you work in?"

"It's not that big," she said. She worked for a public relations firm and had for two years, since graduating from college. He didn't understand what she did, but once she'd met Jodie Foster, and their mom was always bragging to her friends about the job.

Then a car with something that looked like police lights on the top bore down on them. Jackson gripped the wheel and the light in the rearview mirror nearly blinded him. He let up on the gas too fast. "Hey," Rachael said. She sat upright. The car behind them jerked into the left lane and as it flew past, the driver honked, flipped off Jackson.

"Bitch," Jackson muttered. His heart hammered and his legs felt shaky. He wished he would've flipped the guy off in return. But then they'd made it through the

city center. He was going over some bridge and the traffic was beginning to thin. He'd made it through the city. He brought the car to seventy-two and looked at Rachael but she didn't seem to care. He brought it to seventy-three, then seventy-five.

"We could keep going," he said.

"What's that mean?"

"We could go to Vancouver," he said. "It's supposed to be awesome in Vancouver." He'd seen a report on *20/20*. You could buy pot in cafes. There were prostitutes.

"It's this next exit."

And if he kept driving, sped past the exit? But she pointed a moment later and Jackson switched on the blinker, let up on the gas. Again he followed her silent directions. They passed bars, neon gas signs, movie signs, a grocery store. On a dark residential street, Rachael pointed for him to park.

"We made it," he said. He waited to hear how he'd driven, but Rachael just got out and trotted toward a house that looked like the house where he lived back home. It was two stories, beige, with a big window to the left of a small porch. A similar yard, but without the lake in back. He got out, annoyed and hurt that she'd said nothing, took his pack, and followed the path around the house. Their mom was right—Rachael needed his help.

Inside, she switched on a light that shined weakly in the corner by a small brown couch. The apartment was cold. It was tiny. It smelled of cigarette smoke and baby powder. On the kitchen table was a glass ashtray. A tin ashtray on a speaker. The floor was hard, like there was no padding between the cement and the tan carpet. The kitchen

and living room were combined, a room barely larger than his bedroom back home, and the ceiling was so low that Jackson didn't need to extend his arm entirely to touch it. He pressed his palms against the ceiling.

"It's short," he said.

"It's a place to live."

"There's no posters or anything." The bare walls were made of wood paneling. To Jackson's left was a small TV, an antenna duct-taped to the top. He dropped his backpack by the couch. Beyond a half-sized refrigerator, at the far end of the room, a door opened into the bathroom. Two blue towels from an old set their mom had given her hung from a towel rod. Jackson smiled. He used to fold up the towels and fuck them.

Rachael switched on a space heater that began to crackle and emit a sound of dripping water. She stared down at the answering machine. The light wasn't flashing. She pulled at her bottom lip, picked up the phone, and dialed a number. While she waited, Jackson stuck his head through the doorway and looked at her bedroom. It was dark, but it seemed clean, the bed was made. Numbers on the phone were being pressed, and when he turned around she was punching in another number. Listening. She replaced the phone in its cradle.

"What was that about?" he asked.

"Nothing," she said, still staring at the answering machine. Her hands trembled. She'd checked someone's voice mail or something. And Jackson regretted saying it. Their mom asked about everything and he couldn't stand that.

"Do you want a glass of wine?" Rachael asked.

"Is there any beer?"

“There’s some vodka, I think.” She bent down and opened the cupboard under the sink.

Jackson stared too long at her panty line. He’d seen her naked once, when he was thirteen, and when she’d been thinner. He’d imagined her thousands of times since. And now she was bigger, like some of those girls who posed naked in the amateur section, the girls he secretly thought were the best. He pressed his thumb hard into his ribs. He noticed dark-green streaks on the small metal windowsills. “What’s that?” he asked.

“Mildew.”

“That’s sick,” he said. “Can I have some juice?”

“There’s water.”

Rachael filled a coffee mug with tap water and poured herself a glass of red wine. It was just past nine. Friday. They’d go out and she’d sneak him into a bar. But he was starving too. He’d only had a roast beef sandwich his mom made before she left to work.

“Should we listen to something?”

“Play the radio,” Rachael said. She handed him the water and sat down on the couch. She didn’t turn on the radio.

“Where are your CDs?”

“So what else does Mom say?”

“Nothing, really.” He sipped from the water. It tasted like chlorinated mud. “I guess she just said you sound different.” He couldn’t see her CD collection anywhere. He’d sent her some David Bowie CD she’d wanted for her birthday. She’d brought a huge collection home during her last visit. “She’s been reading some book on half-

sibling relationships and she thinks it'd be good for us to become better friends. It's probably some new kick," he said. "Where's your CDs?"

Rachael went to her purse and took a cigarette from the pack. She tossed the pack on the counter, in plain view. She returned with the cigarette pinched awkwardly between the tips of her fingers, like it was slimy, and she lit it with a match.

"When did you start smoking?"

"I don't know."

"Are you allowed to in here?"

"I doubt it."

"Do you remember telling mom that me and that kid Randy smoked balsa wood?"

"It's not like it was all that cheery back then." She dragged from the cigarette.

Jackson wasn't sure what she meant. He waited until it wouldn't seem obvious and then stood up and cracked open the front door. "It's getting hot," he said. He'd throw the cigarettes out when she went to sleep. He remembered the leather-bound journal and the silver pen, a gift from their mom. He dug them from his pack and handed them to her. "Mom thinks you should write—your feelings or something. Like a diary I guess. She thinks that writing is cleansing."

"Dear Diary, I am dirty." Rachael set the journal and the pen atop the speaker, near the ashtray.

"Don't look at me," Jackson said. He felt stupid for giving it to her, like it was him who'd somehow picked out the gifts. "Should we do something tonight?"

"We could write stories."

The few times she'd visited in the summer they would swim in the man-made lake in front of the house. They rented movies. A few times she even played Nintendo, though she never tried. It seemed like they were friends. She always fought with their mom. She was always messing with her fingernails. Once he'd watched her pick at them for forty-five minutes with a paperclip and in the end they were all hangnails and torn cuticles. Plus there was her dad. Jackson wondered how much Rachael and her dad talked. He was pretty sure her dad still lived somewhere near Ashland.

"Do you remember when we drove to Crescent City and body surfed?"

"The next winter your dad left," Rachael said. "Do you remember seeing mom standing at the edge of lake, throwing the biggest rocks she could find, trying to break the thick ice. She said I tried to seduce him."

It caught him the throat. He didn't want to hear about his dad or their mom. He looked at the cigarettes, the mildew, he stared down into his lap. She was messing with him in some way that he didn't understand.

"Does Mom have a new boyfriend?" she asked.

"No," he said, unsure why he was lying to her. She had some guy from her work who'd called Jackson Jack, and he had one thick eyebrow.

Upstairs a door opened and shut, then footsteps clattered over their heads. The muffled voice of a man and a woman. Something skidded across the ceiling.

"Who lives there?"

"An old couple. She was in a wheelchair for a while."

He looked again for some sign of the CDs, but saw the torn-off edge of a condom wrapper by a speaker. It was familiar, the same kind he'd used the one time he'd had

sex. It looked huge in the small room. He looked at her and maybe she understood what he'd seen, he wasn't sure. She seemed to blush, maybe. He imagined Rachael having sex with some big guy on the same couch where they sat, and without thinking he knelt at the CD player and opened it. It was empty.

"There's no fucking CDs," Rachael snapped. Too loud. They'd hear them upstairs. She glared at him. She stood up and tucked her hair behind her ears.

"Goddamn you," she said. She went into her room and shut the door.

He looked at her wineglass, the journal, the piece of condom wrapper. Jackson heard covers ruffling, the creak of her bed. He shivered. He closed the front door quietly and walked to the little green table. He sat at the table, not at all sure what to do. He could call their mom, but she'd told Rachael she was going out of town. Another lie, an excuse to send him north. If he called, their mom would just freak out anyway. Everything would be fine. She'd come out when she realized she was just being stupid. She was always stubborn like that at home, fleeing to her room, and locking herself in.

As he waited, his stomach began growl, and he went to the refrigerator, but it was nearly empty. He took out a quart container of milk and smelled it, winced. There was half a loaf of cheap white bread, a wilted head of lettuce, condiments, and an unwrapped slice of processed cheese. Back home there was everything in the refrigerator. There was a box of Cheerios on the counter. He took it and returned to the couch. With the remote, he turned on the TV, turned the volume low. Only three channels came in and the reception was horrid. He ate handfuls of dry Cheerios, chewing as softly as he could, watching a screen so fuzzy he could hardly see the people. He finished the box and was still hungry.

In a cupboard he found a bag of stale tortilla chips but they were too loud. He kept looking. In a drawer he found a drawing of a cat. Under the cat, in Rachael's tight handwriting, were the words Fat Puss. It was nothing like the squiggly doodles she'd left on the phone book back home. The cat had a wry smile and looked like it was about to wink. He found a photograph of her dad standing by his rig, making the hang-loose sign with his hand, smiling wide. Sunlight gleamed off the truck's chrome. His front tooth was chipped. He looked older. On the backside of the picture, in a man's cursive: On the road.

Jackson's dad was an accountant in Sacramento. He wrote Jackson short letters every second month that focused mainly on the weather and included a twenty-five-dollar check. For Christmas and his birthday they spoke on the phone and a few days later a package containing a surf tee shirt showed up in the mail. Their mom almost never mentioned him.

Jackson went into the bathroom and closed the door quietly behind him. He opened the mirror cabinet slowly, but inside there was nothing unusual. Floss, moisturizer, tampons, a tube of toothpaste, Advil, a hair clip, tweezers, two used matches crossed on the glass shelf. Below the sink, two rolls of toilet paper and more towels.

He forced down two slices of plain bread, drank another glass of water, and then messed with the antenna until he got decent reception on PBS. They were showing something on pelicans. Long birds with thin necks skimmed the faces of waves. They dove for fish. He hoped Rachael would come out. The clock on the stove read nine-fifty and he hadn't heard her covers rustle for some time. He considered knocking, saying sorry—he'd just wanted to listen to a CD. He meant nothing by it. And they'd stay up

and talk, and later she let him share her bed like when they had stayed at hotels on vacations with their mom.

It was almost midnight when the phone rang, startling Jackson. He jumped up and grabbed the receiver before it could ring a second time. "Hello," he whispered.

On the other end he heard low muffled breathing. He looked at the bedroom door, but didn't hear anything.

"Who's this?" a man's voice asked.

"My name's Jackson."

"You're Rachael's brother?"

"Yeah."

"Where'd she go?"

"She's asleep," Jackson said. He looked at the closed door, didn't understand why she wouldn't come out of her room. And he looked at the condom wrapper, the tin ashtray. Four cigarette butts. There was mildew she wouldn't clean.

"I need to talk to her."

"She's asleep."

"There's something—" the voice stopped.

Jackson heard laughter from a TV in the background. He heard something else, some shuffling.

"Just go get her, man," the voice continued. The man coughed, and something in the cough made Jackson more afraid. He listened to the breathing on the other end, and

again heard laughter from a TV. He looked at the TV—the passenger train traveling slowly through Mexico’s Copper Canyon.

“What are you watching?” Jackson asked. He had no idea why he asked it.

“What the hell’s that mean?” And the man coughed again. He cleared his throat. “Shit,” he said sharply.

It sent chills through Jackson. He set the phone in its cradle. He was trembling. Quietly as he could, he locked the deadbolt. He noticed the cigarettes on the counter—he’d forgotten to get rid of them and it seemed too late. The phone rang again.

“Rachael.”

The voice sounded desperate. Jackson hung up and he unplugged the phone. “Try it now, bitch,” he whispered. But he couldn’t stop trembling. He went to the counter and found the largest knife and sat back down on the couch. Covers rustled, but no footsteps. He stared for a long time at the door but nothing happened. He imagined the guy breaking in, smashing the door down with his huge frame. Over and over, he saw himself slicing the guy’s arm, his face. Then the guy got in some punches, threw Jackson into the wall, but Jackson was able to hold onto the knife. He stabbed it deep into the guy’s belly. He’d be in papers. He’d return to school a hero who was whispered about in the halls. But it would be weird to live with the fact that you killed a guy.

He watched the TV but it was just the train creeping along slowly. The train seemed to creep along forever, from different angles. He set the knife next to his thigh. Then he went over and picked up the piece of condom wrapper, and smelled it, but there was just the bread smell on his fingers. He balled it up and threw it in the garbage under the sink. He saw her giving some guy head. Jackson sat back down. He took a deep

breath and held it for a long time, like his mom had taught him. He exhaled. Another deep breath, until his entire chest was full, then the long slow exhaling. He held his hand in front of his mouth and felt his hot breath. It'll be fine. Everything will be fine. It was another thing his mom had taught him: and he was to repeat it always. It'll be fine. Tomorrow she might let him go for another drive, she'd show him around the city.

The sound of a rattling door handle woke him. Jackson was curled on the couch, his jacket pulled over his shoulders. He was freezing. His arm, lodged under his head, was asleep. He sat up. He looked at the ceiling, waiting to hear the cat again. The door handle rattled, and he froze, felt ice in his neck. The light was still on, the TV was still on. A gray-haired man in a tweed suit sat in a leather chair, smoking a pipe, and his legs were crossed like a girl. Jackson grabbed the knife. The door handle rattled again. "Rachael," Jackson whispered, before he could stop himself.

"I hear you," a man's voice said through the door.

There was a knock, just one, but like a firecracker exploding. He looked at the ceiling, wondered if the old couple would come downstairs. Would they call the cops? Was this what normally happened? It was one-twenty. It was still raining. A door opened and Rachael was standing in the bedroom doorway, squinting. She was wearing a white Budweiser tee shirt that hung halfway down her thighs. Her thick white legs. He held out the knife to her and prayed she wouldn't open the front door. But her face scrunched in disgust, she shook her head and looked horrible.

"What are you doing?" she said. And hearing her he dropped the knife by the arm of the couch. She walked passed him and unlocked the deadbolt and opened the door.

Standing in the doorway was a small guy in a leather jacket and black denim jeans. He was drenched. He was tiny and ugly.

“Rachael,” the guy said. He had a wispy goatee and his hair, all one length, slicked back, went to his shoulders. He couldn’t have been taller than five foot six. His eyes scanned the room. His eyes were icy blue, distant, and had dark bags under them. He didn’t hug Rachael, and they didn’t kiss. He stepped past her and stood in front of the television.

“This is my brother, Jackson. This is Keith.”

But neither of them made any move to shake hands. It was her boyfriend or something. Jackson wondered if they’d had sex, but the thought was intolerable—that she would do it with a guy like that.

“I’m soaked,” Keith said. He disappeared into Rachael’s room, closed the door behind him. He coughed the cough Jackson had heard earlier on the phone. There was the sound of a throat being cleared, something was muttered.

“He’s the guy who called,” Jackson whispered.

“Don’t worry about it.”

She still seemed to be mad, distant. It made no sense. He stood up but had no idea why, and he sat back down on the hard cushions. The gray-haired man was gesturing with his hand, puffing on his pipe, smiling. Jackson turned off the TV.

Keith came out wearing a pair of gray sweatpants with a hole in the knee and a blue sweatshirt with a white sailboat stenciled on it. They were too large for him. He turned a knob on the heater and again it began to crackle and make the dripping sound. He ran his hands through his hair, slicking it back, and drops of water dripped down his

face. He sat at the table, picked up a porcelain penguin salt shaker and rolled it around in his hand. He replaced it.

“Do you have cigarettes?” Keith asked.

Rachael tossed him her pack and he took out two, handing one to Rachael.

“You smoke?” Keith asked.

“Pot or cigarettes?” Jackson said.

“Jesus,” Rachael said. She was leaning against the counter and she ashed in the sink. She shook her head. Keith smiled.

Jackson was burning. He held out his hand and was tossed a cigarette and some matches. He’d probably started smoking before both of them. But Keith seemed to notice the knife, then, for the first time, and he eyed Jackson, his left eye a little squinted. He looked back at the knife, making it obvious.

“Was that for me?” he asked. He tried to laugh but it didn’t sound like a laugh. He coughed and his eyes filled with water. His hair came loose and fell over his face.

“He gets nervous,” Rachael said.

“I found it under the couch.” Jackson said defensively. But his hands were shaking. The cigarette tasted horrible. And he shouldn’t have been trembling, because Keith was tiny, a coughing pussy. How could Rachael sleep with him?

“Did you get the job?” Keith asked.

Rachael said nothing. Then she said, “What are you talking about?” But it didn’t even sound like her voice. She looked at Keith and something passed between the two that he couldn’t understand.

It was silent then, for maybe five minutes, though it felt much longer. Outside the rain seemed to fall harder, like it was hail. The silence was unbearable and Jackson searched for things to say—he'd missed another day of school, he hated school, his stupid geography teacher had given him detention the week before for not paying attention. Rachael stood at the counter, and Keith stared at the penguin on the table. The wineglass was still on the speaker next to the journal.

"Can I drink this?" Jackson asked.

"It's wine."

"So."

"I want to get out of here," Keith said softly.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Rachael asked.

"This whole feel here—it doesn't feel right anymore."

"When should it feel right?" Rachael started messing with her fingers again.

"It's miserable out there, it's pouring."

"Out there it's just the rain." Keith looked hard at Jackson, like he was telling him something important.

"You'll confuse him."

"Where do you want to go?" Keith asked. "You're the guest."

Jackson wanted to hit Keith in the face. He wondered if he could beat Keith up—it seemed like he could. "Vancouver," he said. He sipped and swallowed hard. The wine tasted horrible.

"What's with Vancouver?" Rachael asked.

"It's too far," Keith said. "Where else?"

“I don’t know anywhere else,” Jackson said. He scratched his neck. “Where do you want to go, Rachael?”

“To bed.”

“Maybe you should leave,” Jackson said to Keith. Then he realized that he’d said it—and his words hung there, worse than the smoke. He inhaled from his cigarette. It loosened his bowels and needed to shit. He looked down at the knife. Four steps and he’d slash Keith’s face before anyone knew what had happened. Jackson would make him even uglier.

“If I left it’d be awkward,” Keith said. “I’d sort of still be here.” He didn’t say it like it was a threat, but just a fact Jackson should’ve known. Jackson waited for Rachael to say something, to tell Keith it’d be better if he came by another time, but she didn’t.

“We’ll just drive around,” Keith said. “We’ll sightsee.”

“It’s pouring.”

“It’s Friday, and he needs to see things. You told me that.”

Rachael was rolling the filter of the lit cigarette between her thumb and pointer finger and flecks of ash fell to her skin. She wouldn’t look at Jackson. He wanted to know what he needed to see, but he said nothing. They’d been talking about him. It was like it was all planned out somehow—the CDs, the phone call, Keith’s visit. The low ceiling even seemed part of some scheme. Her shitty apartment. She’d lost her job or something and hadn’t told their mom, hadn’t told him.

“Can I keep your sweats on?” Keith asked. He snubbed the cigarette in the ashtray.

“Let’s just go to bed, please.” Rachael dropped her cigarette in the sink. It hissed. She ran her hands through her hair and yawned, stretched, so that her shirt rode up her thighs, almost exposing her panties. He saw cellulite. He wouldn’t let Keith run his hands over her.

“I’m only here three days,” Jackson said. He stood up. He’d told Keith to leave, but it hadn’t been enough. He had to show his sister something right, the togetherness their mom talked about. And he had to see where Rachael would go, what she would do. “You should show me something,” he said.

Keith’s beat-up Pontiac Grand Am was parked behind the Sentra. Jackson sat in the backseat. He looked at the back of Rachael’s head and started to regret that they’d left. The car reeked of Keith’s wet leather jacket and a vanilla-scented car freshener that hung, along with a crystal, from the rearview mirror. There was a CD-man plugged into the cassette player but Jackson couldn’t see any CDs. The floor was filled with McDonalds’ bags, hamburger wrappers, napkins, and next to him, on the seat, was a pair of old high-top basketball shoes without any laces. He was exhausted. But he knew it was better to get out. He couldn’t stand the thought of Keith and his sister sleeping in her room while he lay curled on the couch.

“What do you want to see?” Keith asked.

“That tall building, I guess.” He couldn’t remember its name. He couldn’t think of anything else.

“It’s a skyscraper,” Keith said. “A shell.” He cleared his throat, opened the door, and spit. “Fucker,” he said. He shook his head, and Jackson saw that Keith was upset by whatever was wrong with his throat. “I’d like to just go to my place.”

“I’m kind of hungry,” Jackson said. He didn’t want to go to Keith’s.

“We can all eat there.”

“I don’t care where we go,” Rachael said. “Just let’s stop talking.”

Jackson leaned his head against the window and stared down at the passing sidewalk. The glass was cold against his cheek, his temple. He closed his eyes. When he was younger, he’d close his eyes while their mom drove him home from the movies or a friend’s house, and he’d note each turn so that he could open his eyes just before they stopped in front of the house. He’d try it again. If he guessed right it meant something. Something good would happen though he wasn’t sure what. But they’d be away from Keith—it’d just be him and Rachael. He knew it was stupid, but didn’t care. He opened his eyes, but they kept going. In front of them on a hill was a huge ominous building that looked like an asylum, and skyscrapers were behind them. He closed his eyes, waited a few minutes, and opened them again, but the car rounded a curve, continued. It was a dark street and beyond the trees he could see a few houses. And it was good he looked too soon, because the third time was always the best, meant the most.

But before his third try the car stopped. Keith killed it. Jackson opened his eyes. They were in another residential neighborhood, but more rundown, and on a hill.

“This is where I live,” Keith said. The crystal swayed, catching the light from a nearby porch. Rain pattered on the roof like little pebbles. “We spend time here.”

Jackson followed Keith and Rachael down slick wooden steps to the backyard of a house built into the side of the hill. The hill looked out at an orange-lit freeway, orange-lit warehouses.

“Where are we?” Jackson asked.

“Beacon Hill,” Keith said. “Seattle was built on seven hills.” He opened the door and stepped inside, and Rachael followed, then Jackson.

It looked sort of like a basement and was dimly lit with candles and blue Christmas lights. The floor was covered with overlapping sections of different-colored carpet. It was not empty. In a ratty easy chair in the middle of the room sat a towering guy with dreadlocks the size of Jackson’s forearm. He’d balanced a sixteen-ounce can of Rainier on his thigh. There were beer cans strewn around the chair. The guy was wearing a flannel shirt, loose-fitting black pants, and the largest pair of hiking boots Jackson had ever seen. The guy stared at the muted TV showing a Motor Cross race.

It was a long room, damp and musty. It was warmer than Rachael’s apartment. But Jackson noticed there was no kitchen. There was a party cooler in the corner by a small table with a burner and a loaf of bread on it. On the wall was pinned a poster of Wonder Woman standing in front of a bright-yellow background. It was a stupid poster.

“This is Log,” Keith said. “This is Rachael’s brother, Jackson.”

Jackson wasn’t sure what to do. He waved, and Log nodded his head without taking his eyes from the TV. He drank from his beer. He nodded again as if he’d forgotten that he’d already done it. He had to be seven feet tall and his face was so huge. His skin looked almost gray in the blue light. He needed to shave.

Jackson realized how stupid it was to have waved at the guy, but somehow he'd been unable to say anything. He stuffed his hands in his pocket. A wave of helplessness washed over him and he started to hate Rachael for taking him to this place. He hated that his mom had sent to him to Seattle to find out what was wrong.

"Watch this."

The voice was thick, low. It was Log's voice. They all turned their attention to the TV. A motorcyclist lost control mid-air and crashed upon landing. Another motorcyclist landed the jump but hit the fallen bike. Then another. A pile-up. Jackson looked for a VCR, but there wasn't one. It was on TV. It must have been a replay, or Log wouldn't have known.

"Log's got a motor bike," Keith said.

Log dropped his beer can on the floor, stood up, and walked to the cooler. His head nearly touched the ceiling.

"Anyone?" Log asked.

Keith was fine. Rachael shook her head. Jackson said nothing. He watched Log return with another tall Rainier. On the TV, the winner of the race was being doused with champagne.

"Victory," Log said flatly. He cracked open his beer.

How did you become like that? Jackson imagined the guy's parents as giant gnomes, and then he realized that maybe Rachael had slept with him too. The thought made him sick. It was even worse than the thought of her doing it with Keith. Keith had sat down against the wall and it was like he knew Jackson was thinking about him

because he looked up. Their eyes met. But Jackson had no idea what Keith was trying to tell him.

“Where’s the bathroom?” he asked.

Keith pointed toward the back of the room. “You take a left at the end.”

Jackson stepped away from them all and he realized how far back the place actually went. He walked past an opening, about three feet wide and three feet high, midway up the wall. He’d never seen anything like it.

There was no mirror in the bathroom and this bothered Jackson. He wanted to see what he looked like then. It seemed crucial that he see his face. He needed to be sure that he was going to be alright, and somehow this meant seeing his reflection. There was half a roll of toilet paper in a cupboard. Nothing else. No hand mirror. The toilet was filthy. There was no bathtub, just a small white plastic shell for a shower. He peed, and though he didn’t want to go back into the room, he couldn’t stay in the shitty bathroom.

Jackson was standing by the opening in the wall, looking at her again like he had in the car, when she first pulled out the cigarette. Like he had much of the night. He was trying not to be obvious. She ran her thumb over the crusted edge of a hangnail on her middle finger. She knew that she shouldn’t have let them leave her apartment, but she couldn’t stand his innocent act. That concerned stare. And then trying to be all tough. He was as bad as Keith. And Rachael felt terrified. She had no idea what she was doing, how she’d ended up with Keith, hanging out at Log’s place with her little brother. She dug her thumb into a scab. She loosened it, tore it off. She winced. Her finger started to bleed.

Jackson watched Rachael suck on her finger. He'd watched her picking at it. He'd seen enough. He wanted to be back in Ashland, in his bed with his down comforter, playing Nintendo. He gave a little wave for Rachael to join him.

"What is this?" Jackson asked, in a whisper.

"You can sleep in there tonight." Rachael stuck her arm into the opening.

"There's a mattress and blankets. It's the sleeping hole," she said.

"Can we go home?" Jackson whispered, but his whisper sounded too loud.

"We're here tonight," Rachael said. "This was your idea."

"Can we sleep in here tonight?"

"Like in the hotels?"

"I guess."

"You'll be fine in there," she said.

Jackson slipped off his shoes and his socks, and he dropped his jacket on the floor. He climbed into the hole. It was too short for him to even crawl on his hands and his knees. The mattress was thin and there were no covers. But as he inched further into the space he reached a blanket, two pillows. It all smelled like the mothballs in their mom's closet. It felt like there were little bugs on his skin. He remembered seeing a show on bedbugs once, saw them magnified. They were crawling on his body. Or it was fleas or microscopic roaches. He tried to pretend he was sleeping in his mom's closet for the hell of sleeping in a new place. He was safe. It'll be fine. He'd wake up and eat French toast and drink fresh-squeezed orange juice. But he heard Log shifting in his chair, and he could hear Rachael and Keith whispering from somewhere.

Jackson was awake when Log climbed into the sleeping hole. Log grunted and grabbed at the covers that Jackson had been using. Jackson made no fight as the covers slipped away from his body. And Jackson was still awake when Log nuzzled up to him. He felt Log's hot sour breath on his neck and he wanted to die. Somewhere he could hear their whispers. They were talking about him, he was sure. He thought he heard Rachael's laugh. Keith had made her laugh. Or they were laughing at him, that he was stuck in the sleeping hole with Log. But they couldn't be laughing. He heard Keith cough. He listened. Log shifted and draped his massive arm over Jackson's shoulders. Jackson tried to move, then, but he couldn't.

Someone Had to Tell Them

On the screen the black number-three car crashed slow motion into the wall. The yellow car hit the black car. Then the press conference, where the president of NASCAR mourned the loss of Dale Earnhardt.

“Dead,” Dean said.

It was Sunday night. It was the second time in an hour that they’d watched the wreck. They’d been watching TV for a few hours, since finishing dinner, Dean on the couch, his wife, Lena, on the easy chair.

“We should watch something else,” Lena said. She’d drawn her knees to her chest and was holding her ankles. She swam in his paint-spattered sweatpants and an over-sized sweater. Her voice had the same flat tone that it had had the day before, when she told him that at a party on Friday she’d been raped.

“It’s like we eat this shit up,” Dean said. He pushed the mute button, but continued to watch the man’s mouth move. He realized that Monday’s radio shows would be spoiled. The whole week would be ruined, as the hosts went on in the low tone of phony compassion that disgusted him. Just like repeating it on the TV so that everyone can watch him die over and over. The radio hosts would call him a hero, go on about how he revolutionized the sport of racing, and the listeners would probably call in to share their despair. But then Dean felt the soft dull ache of self-disgust. He was a thirty-one-year-old. He was worrying about sports radio. He hadn’t driven the few miles and beaten the guy, Paul, senseless with a baseball bat. He hadn’t even offered or even

really though about it until it was too late. Too calculated. She knew that he'd been able to go to sleep without doing a thing.

Lena stood up in the chair and stepped to the floor. "I'm going to bed," she said.

It was ten-thirty. Usually they watched the news until eleven, turned in together. "You're going to work tomorrow?"

"What else would I do?"

Dean didn't have an answer, and judging by the tightness of her voice one wasn't expected. "I'll be in," he said. He had no idea why said it. He'd slept on the couch the night before and he'd sleep on the couch again.

Lena crossed the living room without glancing at him. It bothered Dean that since telling him she almost never met his gaze directly. If she did, it lasted an instant. It was probably better, because if she looked long enough she'd see that really he wondered if his wife had concocted the story to cover an affair.

Lena disappeared into bathroom and closed the door behind her. From where he sat on the couch he could only see a sliver of the door, the door handle. He stared at the handle. He didn't like being left alone. He spent enough time alone in the their apartment. He painted houses and hadn't worked in two weeks, and when he did work it was almost always on his own. He felt sick and ashamed, suspecting her. They'd been married over a year, had been a couple two-and-a-half years. He felt certain she'd never cheated before and he knew she didn't have that kind of a lie in her. It didn't help. He imagined her with the guy, not always being forced. The picture filled him with a mix of despair and a desire he didn't understand, because part of him almost liked imagining her with another man.

On the TV someone slammed-dunked over a Sonic. The player pumped his chest and threw his arms in the air. They were showing clips of his Seattle Sonics losing to the Dallas Mavericks. His team was playing horribly. The faucet in the bathroom ran. He could hear the rain at the window. On the screen they listed the rest of the basketball scores. Dean leaned forward in the couch, but immediately leaned back. He could see his reflection in the glass of the framed print of a Monet painting. He was becoming a neurotic asshole, back and forth. He switched channels, from the local news to ESPN and they were replaying the wreck again. Lena slipped from the bathroom into their bedroom while he wasn't looking.

The clock atop the bookcase was some sort of antique, something from Lena's grandfather, a sailor. It had a barometer that didn't work. Dean watched the minute hand hit forty Ten forty. He stretched his arm to turn on the stereo. The familiar jingle introduced the sports headlines. The announcer, in a solemn voice, explained that the racing world mourned the loss of the greatest racecar driver in NASCAR history. Dale Earnhardt had died instantly at the age of forty-one, when the car he was driving slammed into a wall on the final lap of the Daytona 500. He'd been trying to fend off the other racers so either his son, Dale Earnhardt, Jr., or teammate, Michael Waltrip, could win. Waltrip won. It was his first victory in four hundred sixty-three tries.

"A spoiled win," Dean said aloud, staring at the textured ceiling, as the announcer moved on to the NBA scores. Dean ran his tongue along the ridge on the inside of his cheek, where he'd chewed as he slept. His Sonics had lost. He'd talked about the Sonics with Paul during an employee party in December at the house of the dentist for whom

Lena worked. The guy was tiny, wearing wire-rimmed glasses, slacks, loafers, and he talked loud, like he was in control. Dean was six foot, had a thick trunk, rough work-hardened hands, and he'd done nothing.

He went to the window and split the blinds enough to watch the rain sputter on the puddles. He shivered. It was February. Across the street the bar was closed, dark, the chairs upturned atop the tables. On the corner, by the mini mart, a couple stood under the awning, waiting for something, it seemed.

Dean left the window and put on the green tee shirt he'd worn the day before. He made his way into the kitchen where he smelled burnt coffee and heard the coffee machine's sporadic muttering. On the counter by the sink, the half carcass of a Cornish game hen lay on each plate, shriveled, surrounded by congealed fat and butter, a few shrunken peas, flecks of potato peel. They'd eaten in silence, but they finished everything. He'd still been hungry. It made no sense that they could go on eating the big meals that he prepared. And Lena hadn't told him anything when she came home late and slipped into their bed stinking of cigarette smoke. She waited until the next day, around noon, as they sat on the couch while he watched college basketball. The volume was muted, and she shivered in his arms, but didn't cry. Just her flat voice. And all Dean could think, as he watched the players run up and down the court, was that they'd slept in the same bed, him not knowing what had happened to her. He woke up horny when she returned and he tried to have sex. She'd endured his groping hands as he tugged at the boxer shorts she always wore to bed. Dean couldn't think of what had gone through her mind as he kept at it.

He saw Lena and Paul in some small bare bathroom that stank of a vanilla-scented candle, people mingling just beyond the door, laughing and groaning and waiting to piss. She'd told him it happened in Paul's friend's room, on the floor. It didn't matter. Dean saw a bathroom, where she could've screamed, could've pounded on the door. Even if it did happen upstairs in some guy's room she could have done something. She wasn't stupid. She could take care of herself. And the worst of it was wondering how she ended up upstairs in the bedroom anyway. How had she been talked into it?

In the sink lay an eggshell—they must have been out of milk. He threw the shell away, rinsed the drying egg white down the drain. He poured himself a cup of coffee and went into the living room. Dean switched on the stereo again, catching the host mid-thought: "...just irrefutable," the guy was saying. "Earnhardt was more than the Tiger Woods of auto racing. Woods, Jordon, McEnroe, and MacGwire all together. That big."

"And you're Bill Walton," Dean said to the stereo. He sipped the coffee as the man continued. It was just like he figured—endless phony shit. "You don't care," he told the host. "You really don't."

They went to commercial. When the commercials ended, they replayed the prepared statement from the president of NASCAR, who again lamented not only the loss of the greatest driver in stockcar history, but a dear close friend. When the man finished, there was a long pause.

"We can't imagine it," the commentator finally said, his voice wavering.

"Bullshit you stupid soft cock," Dean yelled. He was filled with rage. He felt helpless against the voice coming from the speaker.

He stood up and walked into their bedroom. It was cool and dim with the blinds half-drawn, and he noticed that she'd made the bed. They never made the bed. Dean struggled into a pair of blue jeans. On the floor in the corner he noticed a crumpled pair of blue panties and went to them. They were cotton, cut conservatively. Had she changed them? Had she put on the one of the sexy pair he'd bought her, slipped them on while he slept so that she could show them off in her white pants? Dean felt short of breath and without thinking he opened the top drawer of her dresser and with made sure that they were all there. This wasn't him, though. It wasn't, he thought. He saw himself in the mirror, in boxers and tee shirt, his hair on end. He had to get outside.

Dean decided against putting in his contacts. He took his keys and his wallet and he walked out the door. On the sidewalk, at the foot of the cement stairs, was a Carl's Jr. bag, French fries and a half-eaten hamburger spilling from it, and next to it pink shake oozed from a cup. The rain diluted the shake and carried it along in the cracks. A city bus roared past.

The chime whined as Dean stepped into the mini mart, and he looked back at the eye that had triggered it. Inside, the familiar smell of bleach and something he might find in an attic. In the far corner were the refrigerators packed with sodas, juice, and beer. Three short aisles for chips, candy, canned food, flour, cake and biscuit mix. Behind the counter a rack of magazines, their covers hidden by cardboard. There were condoms, KY jelly, chewing tobacco. The cigarettes were overhead. A torn poster of Billy Dee Williams with his arms around two women wearing bikinis and high heels.

The Korean man emerged, limping, and he smiled at Dean. Only then did Dean pick a paper from the rack. The man walked up behind the counter, and Dean put a paper on the plastic surface with a Marlboro ad in it.

“A bit of a crash,” Dean said and pointed at the newspaper.

“It’s no good,” the man said, making no move to ring it up.

“I suppose not.”

“Do you understand cramps?” the man asked.

“Excuse me?” Dean smiled.

“My calves won’t loosen,” the man said. “For weeks.”

“Do you drink enough milk?”

“It could be this rain.” The man gestured toward the window.

“It could be,” Dean said. He noticed a rack of sunglasses on a counter by the window and he went over to them. He tried on a pair with large black lenses, cop glasses, and peered into the tiny mirror attached atop the rack. They looked fine, but he needed a shave. He ran the back of his hand along his moist stubbled jaw. He’d go cruise past Paul’s house in his truck, maybe catch a glimpse of him in the window. Lena had pointed the house out once, maybe a month earlier, as they had driven past, and Dean had thought nothing of it. He’d never been especially jealous, and it was just small talk.

The chime startled him and he turned to see a woman in a rain suit, her lips caked with burgundy lipstick. They looked at each other for a moment too long, until Dean looked away. His cheeks flushed. But fuck her. She didn’t know anything. He pulled back his shoulders a bit and looked in the mirror again while the woman asked for a

package of Kent cigarettes, paid in change, and left. Dean put the glasses back on the rack and went to the counter.

“No sun.” The man grinned, exposing a set of stained teeth. Dean couldn’t tell if there was something condescending in man’s grin.

“Sure,” Dean said. He nodded.

The man bent down, below the counter, and Dean picked a green Jolly Rancher from a plastic bowl and slipped it into his coat pocket. The man stood up and smiled and Dean smiled and paid him for the paper. He thanked him and left. The chime sounded. He stood just under the awning, the newspaper tucked under his arm, and looked down the wet street. The cars were stopped at a light and for a moment it was quiet. He had no idea why he’d taken the candy and he felt ashamed. Dean had never been a thief. He supposed that the man trusted him, but there was no way he was going in there.

Back in his apartment Dean stripped down to his boxers and his tee shirt and he turned up the heat. He fished out the sport’s section. There was another picture of the wreck, along with one of Earnhardt and one of the family that survived him. He began to read the story: On Sunday the racing world was stunned when the car Dale Earnhardt was driving lost control and crashed in the wall on the final lap of the Daytona 500. Dean knew this already. He wet his thumb and rubbed out Earnhardt’s face. The bushy mustache. The hero.

With his big toe, Dean switched on the stereo. They’d left Earnhardt for a moment and were discussing college basketball. Dean found the crossword puzzle. When he finished it, he lay back in the couch and stared at the ceiling, trying to fall asleep. He couldn’t. He sat up and worked his hands under his thighs and looked around the room.

There was the Monet poster, the Venus flytrap she'd bought him a few months earlier, the Rolling Stones' CD case on the floor by the stereo. Her coffee mug on the table, her black hair-clip atop the TV.

It was a quarter to two when the radio host began reading emails. Jack, from Columbia, South Carolina. Benny, from Little Rock. Melissa, from Shreveport. He meant so much to us and he'll never be forgotten, not ever. I grew up watching Dale race, and it feels like we've lost family.

Dean turned the volume to a low murmur and went to the window, looked out through the blinds. The rain had settled into a thick dreary mist. The big soiled sheet. And Lena at work, wearing her white pants and her tennis shoes, her gray Mickey Mouse sweater, or the one she'd bought in Malibu with the sunset on it. Lena sticking her gloved hands into peoples' gaping mouths, scraping their stained teeth with little tools. The whir of the polisher. She hadn't even called in sick, they hadn't called the police. And no rubber. Would she get tested? Would Dean have to ask if he now needed to wear one himself? He grabbed the cordless phone and dialed the toll-free number he'd heard so many times. It rang twice before someone answered.

"My name's Peter, and I'm calling from Seattle," Dean said. "I have a story about Dale."

"Sure," the screener said. "What do you got?"

"I met him once, on my fourteenth birthday. My dad had taken me to the Daytona 500. Me and him were eating at a steakhouse and Dale walked in and sat two tables away. When he finished, I went up with my ball cap and he ruffled my hair and signed

the bill. He told me never to give up—to chase all my dreams the way he drives his car. So that if there's a positive about this tragedy, it's that we can live by that. Because he lived his life so full." Dean paused a second. "I just want to say that," he said.

The screener put him on hold. Dean turned the stereo off and stood, eyeing his reflection in the glass of Lena's framed poster.

"Peter in Seattle," Dean heard in the receiver after a moment. "Are you still there, Peter?"

"Yeah," Dean said. "I have a quick story about Dale." He waited to be encouraged to continue.

"Go on, Peter," the host said, in that subdued voice.

"NASCAR, as you can imagine, isn't too big here," Dean said. "But my dad loved it. So for my fourteenth birthday he took me to the Daytona 500. We were at a steakhouse the day before the race and Dale was eating there too. I know this sounds really stupid and corny, but there was this vibe or something around his table. You felt you were in the presence of someone special."

"I got something like that every time I interviewed him," the host said.

No you didn't, Dean thought. You have no idea. He cleared his throat.

"Anyway, he'd got there after us, so we had to eat slow so I could get my ball cap signed without disturbing him. But he ordered another steak. It was funny, because my dad was so giddy, like a kid again, like he'd forgot everything. He was just smiling and trying make eye contact with Dale."

"I'm sure," the host said and laughed.

You feel-good little bitch. Dean pressed the receiver against his ear, felt his sweating palm against the hard plastic. "But it was me," he said. "Dale caught me looking and waved me over. I looked at my dad, who nodded at me to go, so I walked over there all timid. Dale was still eating and there was all this steak blood dripping down his chin and when he smiled his mouth was full of chewed-up meat."

"Where you going with this?" the host asked, suddenly very serious.

"That's just it," Dean said. "Because after he signed my cap, incidentally, he told me to be wary of all the vultures that'll pick a man dry."

"Yeah, whatever, Peter," the host said, his voice hostile. The phone clicked and after a moment went dead. Dean switched on the radio. "Yeah, whatever, Peter," he heard, and they cut to a commercial.

He held the phone in his shaking hand, standing in the middle of the living room, staring at it absently before he hung up. Enough of this, Dean. But it was right to call. He was certain of that. He placed the receiver in the phone's cradle and sat down and rested his elbows on his thighs. He watched the phone, waiting for it to ring, for the angry screener to call him a disgraceful human being, a heartless piece of shit. Or maybe the police would call and charge him with phone harassment. Defaming the dead. Maybe Lena was pregnant with another man's baby that Dean would have to raise.

"Ring," he said to the phone, clenching his fists, pressing his heels into the throw rug. "Ring." It was silent. Outside, a woman's high shrill voice yelled, "Maria."

"Someone had to tell them," Dean said.

They returned from commercial and said nothing about him. Instead they discussed the need for a head-and-neck device. How a head-and-neck device might have saved him. How the drivers resisted using such a device.

Dean walked into their bedroom and sat down on the edge of their bed, but he had no idea why he was there. He looked at the blue panties and again felt ashamed. He returned to the living room. The stereo was still lit. It was still on.

He was lying on the couch when he heard Lena's footsteps on the stairs. The sound frightened him, filled him with guilt. He feigned sleep. Sports radio was murmuring low in the dark room, and when she switched on the light he pretended to wake with a start. He rubbed his palms into his closed eyes and scratched his hair. Lena shut the door and locked it behind her. She dropped her purse on the chair closest to the door and went to the radio and turned it off.

"How can you stand that crap?"

Her mascara was bleeding around her eyes, but she hadn't been crying, at least not recently. It was the rain. She hung her coat on the peg. The same motions he watched everyday when he didn't work. And she looked so beautiful, her pale face, her blue eyes that avoided his gaze, her shivering sloped shoulders. He couldn't stand it. Just another day, like it was the week before, but without the kiss. And that he couldn't ask her how work had gone. What did he expect, that she'd fall in front of him, sobbing, and say how scared she was, or that she'd confess to the lie?

He'd called the radio show, he'd gone through her drawer, and that's what he'd done. He was one of those guys. He hated the guys that called in and blabbered, almost

cried, indignant with someone's poor play, someone's lack of heart. Lonely men in their apartments, finishing one Budweiser after the next, jerking off three times a day.

"The guy at the mini mart asked me about his cramps," Dean said.

"Yeah?" Lena said. She walked into the bedroom.

Dean heard her changing her clothes and felt certain she would notice that he'd gone through her drawer. She noticed everything, but never confronted him on anything, rarely complained about his messiness, his problems saving money, his need to get another job. But if she understood that he didn't quite believe her, knew that he'd counted her panties.

"He told me his calves are all cramped up," Dean said, "that it's hard for him to walk. I guess it's been like that for a few weeks."

Something small and plastic dropped on the desktop in the bedroom and Lena muttered something that Dean couldn't hear. "I guess you can get used to anything," she said. "What are we going to eat?"

"I don't know," he said. He sat up in the couch. You can get used to anything. Her words made his legs begin to tingle, like when he couldn't fall asleep. "Maybe we should we go out to eat," he said. "It might be good to get out. We can go for a drive," Dean said. They went on drives sometimes, aimless excursions to get out of the apartment. He didn't know what else to do, but the thought of staying in their place was too much.

"There's nothing here?"

"We could eat peanut butter and jelly."

"Don't be funny, Dean. Please."

“I’m not being funny,” he said, but regretted his irritated tone. He didn’t hear her moving around anymore. “What are you doing?” he asked.

“Nothing.”

Lena returned wearing loose-fitting khaki pants and a crew-neck charcoal wool sweater that hung to the top of her thighs. The sweater was a gift he bought for her the previous Christmas and she rarely wore it. He wondered if she was trying to say something by wearing it now, and if so, what? Did she want the comfort of something he’d given her, or was it the start of some apology? She sat down in the leather chair adjacent the couch, drew her knees to her chest, and her toes hung off the edge of the chair.

The Jolly Rancher was there on the table and he tossed it to Lena. It landed next to her and she unwrapped it, put in her mouth, and began gnawing on it as she leafed through the newspaper. “They were talking about this at work,” she said, and gestured at the wreck. She bit into the hard candy.

“Yeah,” Dean said. “But they don’t care.”

Lena glanced at him. She opened the paper and disappeared behind it.

“They don’t,” Dean said. “It’s just something to say. It’s just shit.”

“How would you know?” she asked. She picked at a piece of candy stuck between her teeth.

It was quiet for a long time. Lena read the paper while Dean listened to the rain and the cars outside. It was seven. The silence ate at him. She’d been home half an hour, and he knew they’d turn on the TV soon and settle in for the night. He’d go into

the kitchen and find something to cook. They'd eat silently in front of a sitcom, getting used to a new routine, and then wait until it was time to go to sleep.

"Should we go somewhere," he said.

"I'm not really hungry."

"We don't have to eat."

"I guess not," Lena said. She dropped the paper on the floor, leaned back into the chair, and stared absently out the window. Then she got up and went into the bathroom. When she came back, she went to their pile of shoes and took her favorite leather pair, the pair, Dean knew, that she'd worn to the party.

He picked his pants off the floor and stepped into them, then reached down for his sweatshirt. "I almost bought some cop glasses today," he said.

They'd been driving around in silence for twenty minutes when Lena finally pointed to the right. Dean pulled into a park just north of the piers on the waterfront downtown. There were only two cars in the lot and he drove past them and parked close to where the grass and the path began. Dean cut the engine and the rain rattled on the roof. He hadn't turned off the windshield wipers and they pointed up to the right, diverting streams of water down the glass.

They faced the water. In the distance was a ferry, its windows brightly lit. They hadn't been on the ferry for a few months—sometimes they rode one just get out of the city—and Dean wanted to mention this, but it seemed stupid. Minutes passed in a curious silence, like they were on a first date. Then the car filled with light and Dean

turned to see headlights approaching, slowly. A cop car, but what could they do? But still Dean sat up straight as the car came closer.

“Maybe we should go,” Lena said.

But the car turned around and drove off. Dean saw it wasn’t a cop car. And he knew they couldn’t just go back home. “I called out their shit sympathy,” he said. He clutched the steering wheel tightly.

“What?” Lena asked.

“The racecar driver,” he said. “I called up the radio with some story about meeting him with my dad.”

“Please don’t talk stupid.”

He could see that she didn’t know whether to believe him. He knew he should drop it, smile, apologize. Then what? Drive back home? Lay on the couch staring at the ceiling?

“You just can’t stand it, all their bullshit,” Dean said softly. “They hung up when I called them vultures.”

She watched him for a moment, and even with the shadows he could see pain in her face as she worked it all out—that he didn’t believe her, that he called to tell someone he didn’t believe her. He looked away.

“Let’s go home,” she said. Her voice was thin and she ran her hand along her pants, smoothing them out.

“I guess so,” he said. He looked at himself for a second in the rearview mirror. His back tightened and he gripped the wheel with both hands but made no move to leave. He stared out at the water. He noticed that the ferry was approaching, growing larger. It

seemed so strange that it was there at all, so well lit, with people in it, and that he had dragged his wife from their apartment to sit in a car and watch this on some rainy night.

Then Lena was reaching over him and pressing the button that locked the doors with a little click. Dean looked up and saw a man approaching the car, the man bundled up in a ragged winter coat, a blanket draped over his head. He carried a white plastic grocery sack with both hands, and the bag slapping against his thighs as he walked. His mouth moved like he was talking to himself.

“Goddamnit,” Dean muttered, as the man walked around to the driver side. The man bent down, gestured for Dean to open the window, and Dean cracked it an inch.

“Hey you,” the man hissed. His eyes were huge and there was too much white. “I need a ride.”

“Get out of here,” Dean said.

“I need a ride. I got some meat here.” He opened the bag and took out a family-sized pack of pork chops and pressed it against the window. “Look,” he said. “I found all this meat. It’s good meat. You can have some if you give me a ride. Look at all this rain.”

“Get the hell out of here,” Dean said. He rolled up the window. He felt helpless again, and helpless he felt angry. He slammed his open hand against the glass.

The man didn’t flinch. “Come on,” he called. “It ain’t far.”

“Just go,” Lena yelled.

Dean turned the key. He put the car in reverse, revved the engine, hoping to scare the man away.

“No you don’t,” the man yelled. He pounded his fist against the windshield, then pounded the hood.

Dean remembered the lights and switched them on. He let out the clutch and slowly backed away, watching the man who stood still in the beams like a stuck deer staring back at him. Dean put the car into first and drove away toward the exit, looking back once to see the man still standing there frozen.

“Let’s go home, Dean,” Lena said.

“Sure.” He slowed the car to a stop at the red light. When it changed, though, he turned right toward downtown, away from where they lived. Lena looked at him. Finally her eyes were on him, but he stared straight ahead as he drove. And though Dean was shaken by the man pounding on the car and pleading, it felt good knowing that his wife was watching him, wondering what he was doing. He drove through downtown, Lena’s Ford Taurus tiny against the skyscrapers. We’re nothing, he thought,

It was the end of rush hour and the streets were still busy. People still scurried along the sidewalks, under their umbrellas. Twice cars honked at him, but he didn’t care. It was two days late, he understood this, but there was still some chance. They were behind Capitol Hill, getting closer to where Paul lived. Lena was looking at him more often. When he turned left onto 24th Avenue, she sat up straight and tugged on her seatbelt.

“Where are we going?”

Her right hand was clutching her pants just below her left knee, pulling taut the fabric against her thigh. The thigh she’d given up, or that had been taken. That had been kissed or come upon—it didn’t matter. He would show her something.

“I’m just driving,” he said. He let up on the gas as he rounded the gentle ess turn and started down the hill.

“Go home, Dean. Just keep going.”

The engine revved high, straining as the wheels rolled faster, but he just held tight the quivering stick shift. A car came up behind them, its lights filling the rearview mirror, and rode them close. Dean flicked up the rearview mirror. He could see the two-story house a block away, the sharply-slanted roof, the quaint house, his humble abode. The porch light was on. Paul had to know that there was a price for all this. He had to be expecting a visit, unless he hadn’t raped her, and thus expected nothing. Even if was an affair, he had to know it was at a price. Dean thought about them together again in the bathroom as he switched on the blinker and pulled into the parking lane across from the house. The driver of the car following him honked as he passed and the car sped off down the hill. Dean pulled up on the parking break and put the car into gear. He killed the engine. He switched off the headlights.

“Don’t do this,” Lena said softly. She was crying, sobbing really. He could see that her chest was heaving. She looked so small, bundled in her raincoat, staring down at her knees. And he almost apologized, almost restarted the car. But this passed, and Dean felt only the weight of his failure.

He got out and shut the door. The rainwater, lit by a street lamp, flowed down the hill. Rain streaked down his face and he felt it dripping down the back of his neck as he walked around the car. He squinted, washed in the headlights, and stopped, stared defiantly at each driver. He noticed a shoe in the grass by the sidewalk. On the porch, he stepped over a newspaper in a plastic bag and stopped on a beige welcome mat. He

knocked hard three times. He moved his head closer to the door to listen, waiting to hear the footsteps. He knocked once more, harder.

Dean felt the door on his knuckles and had no idea what he'd do when Paul opened the door and for the first time he looked back at the car. Lena was slouched in her seat, not watching. He couldn't see much, but he could tell she was staring down into her lap. It felt strange, then, the distance between them.

Dean knocked once more and waited. Paul was eating, watching the news. Or he was in the bathroom, he was the type of guy who'd keep someone waiting. Unless he'd seen Dean's approach and understood what was in store. Maybe he was calling the cops, it didn't matter, because he'd have to come to door at some point.

"Come on, bitch," he said. He immediately regretted saying it. His voice sounded ridiculous, the affected tough-guy talk, and his moment, his chance to restore order, seemed suddenly to hang in a loose balance. It was tipping toward absurdity. He tried to save it. He knocked even harder, but this seemed too desperate. Dean understood that Paul wasn't home. It was lost. The life seemed to drain out of him as he turned away from the door.

After the Game

In the bottom of the sixth inning Graham realized that his daughter would run off. Because though she swore otherwise, Kristin understood baseball, would know that it was the right moment. It was perfect. Clutch-hitting Edgar Martinez was up with runners at the corners, one out, and Seattle was down one to the Yankees. The crowd was roaring and Graham was repeating to himself, Jesus, Edgar, Jesus. Knock that fucker out of here. He was kneading his fists into his thighs, edging his ass almost off the seat, and suddenly he knew. He just felt that familiar knot in his stomach—a peach stone, a child's clenched fist. He felt strangely giddy and despairing at once. And, as if on cue, Kristin leaned over to him.

“You're a shit,” she whispered. Her breath was warm on his ear and smelled of peanuts. “A real shit.”

She stood up and smiled kindly, though a bit phony, at the large woman to her right. She said, “Excuse me.” His daughter had on the white shorts she always wore in the summer and the gray Washington Husky's sweatshirt. She was sixteen and already she had her mother's long slim bronze legs. And what a sight: his daughter trying to edge past a pasty fat woman who wore matching sweatpants and sweatshirt. The woman didn't stand up. She just moved her legs to the left, but there wasn't enough room to get past. Kristin bumped her calf against a man's head sitting in the row below them. She apologized. The woman shifted to her right, looked up, helpless, and finally Kristin stepped over her legs.

A ruined exit, Graham thought. He watched as his daughter reached the aisle. She wouldn't look back, but he had to be looking in case she did, and anyway he liked to watch. He admired her determination. She started up, clutching the handrail, staring at the cement steps while the crowd cheered louder. She was insecure that way. Graham had noticed for a few years how she always looked at the ground, letting her shoulders slump forward, her long blond hair covering most of her face.

When his daughter disappeared through the walkway, Graham's gaze fell for a moment on the large woman. She squinted contemptuously at him. She seemed to be saying something about how he couldn't control his daughter, or maybe that he was the kind of father a daughter would run from and that that was disgraceful. But she didn't know anything. He considered leaning over, resting his hand across her thick shoulder, and whispering something nasty in her ear. You should worry more about that belly of yours, ma'am. Instead he nodded to the woman, not sure what he meant by it.

He returned his attention to the game in time to see Martinez take a ball. The crowd cheered louder. The big screen behind centerfield came alive. It flashed: "Louder, louder, louder!" Each *louder* beamed in larger letters. The crowd responded. They howled, clapped harder. Martinez waved his bat around—his big old dick, Graham thought. The pitcher, Andy Pettite, threw a slider that missed and Martinez smacked it into the leftfield wall for a ground-rule double, scoring the runners. The crowd jumped to its feet. They roared. Graham roared, though without all of his heart. He needed to leave, he should've left, chased after his daughter immediately. He felt the ache of regret, but he told himself it was nothing—he should've been used to it. Five months earlier his wife, Kristin's mom, Liz, had left them, taking only what she could fit in car.

She left a note that read, "This isn't right. Don't look for me, please." A week later, Kristin walked out of the house as they sat together picking at their dinner. She stayed away until the next morning. She began making scenes at the restaurant where he started taking her for Sunday breakfast. Then she took a Greyhound to Portland. It was as far as she could go on the twenty she'd stolen from his wallet. She called him from the bus terminal in Oregon and asked him to come pick her up. He drove the two-and-a-half hours south and found her asleep in a chair with a TV mounted on it. On the ride home she told him how his cousin, Mitchell, who'd been coming by their apartment since Liz had left, had tried to kiss her.

The announcer announced Bret Boone and the crowd started again. Graham sighed. He struggled into his sweatshirt without removing his cap. He reached under his seat for the half-eaten bag of peanuts. It was foolish, but he glanced back up the aisle anyway, half-hoping she'd be coming back with a soda or a licorice rope. There was nothing, some guy bent over, tying his shoe.

Graham stood up as Bret Boone stepped into the batter's box. The cheering was building. His elbows tingled. But he had to go. "Excuse me," he said.

"Of course," the woman said, and Graham sensed a hint of hostility in her voice. It didn't matter. At least this time she knew better and stood.

"You're a wicked man," she said into Graham's shoulder as he edged past.

"And you might lose some weight," he said without giving it a second's thought. He said it loud enough so she'd know he wasn't ashamed. And maybe someone giggled, he wasn't sure. It was probably the cheering. He didn't care either way. He didn't care that her husband stood to her right and judging by the grave look on his face had heard it

too. Graham noticed that her husband had on the same Mariners' cap that Liz had bought him a few years back. The same cap Graham was wearing. The man didn't say anything, and looked away as Graham stared. Graham stood at the edge of the aisle unsure what to do. There was an urge to smack the cap off the man's head, but he thought better of it. Still, he stood staring at cap, somehow unable to understand that it could be the same one.

"Hey," someone yelled from a few rows up.

Fine, he thought. He turned and trudged up the aisle without making eye contact with anybody. It always seemed there was someone whose face would stick with him for the rest of the night, some disturbing face all balled up and ugly, unhappy, or so solemn and dead that it sent his mood spiraling. He stopped at a television set mounted near a concession stand and watched Boone take a ball. He could smell popcorn and hotdogs, the faint scent of the sea. He glanced around at the people buying food, the couples holding hands, strolling aimlessly, oblivious to the game, a father and his son at the merchandise booth, teenagers on their cellular phones.

Graham rubbed the back of his neck. He and Liz had gone to a few games in the Kingdome, before it had been destroyed, but had never visited the new park together. He knew she would've liked the open space, the view of downtown. She liked baseball. And now she was probably Ashland, with her sister, or maybe she'd gone to New Mexico. She always talked about New Mexico. She hated the gray rainy winters. Maybe she just showed up in Santa Fe with her car full of her things, ready to start over.

Graham hurried down a flight of stairs and heard the crowd erupt. He kept walking. At the exit, an usher, an older woman with gray feathered-back hair, grinned and asked whether he needed his hand stamped. Her teeth were dark with nicotine and

she acted so overly happy. He said he didn't need a stamp, and looked away as the woman wished him a good night.

Outside it was colder and Graham stuffed his hands into his pants pockets. The clouds had covered the stars, and the breeze had picked up, carrying with it the odor of garbage. It would rain, mist at least. He took a deep breath, sighed, and walked up to the crosswalk. And that it got to that, he thought, that you ended up with those teeth, stationed at an exit asking people if they wanted their hand stamped, and acting over-friendly.

A police officer with a massive belly and bushy mustache stood at the crosswalk, staring absently down the street. "They score?" the officer asked. He seemed to regard Graham with some suspicion.

"Not yet," Graham said. He dug out a cigarette and lit it. He pulled back his shoulders.

"Is it close?"

"We're down by three."

"Shame you can't stick around, maybe see a comeback."

"I got the family, sir," he said. He casually looked around but saw no sign of his daughter. She had to be nearby though, watching, making sure he chased after her. And he was. He was the father come to save his daughter.

The light changed. Graham nodded to the officer, then crossed the street. He wasn't sure where to go. They lived twenty-five minutes south of the Seattle and he didn't know the city that well. And where would Kristin go? He had no idea, but he started walking toward downtown. He heard the woman calling him wicked again, saw

her sour face, her husband wearing that cap. The woman couldn't have heard Kristin call him a shit. Graham remembered the ride back from Portland with his daughter, how he'd made the mistake of asking her if she had done anything to give Mitchell ideas. How he hadn't quite believed her. And how she hadn't replied, instead sobbed quietly the rest of ride home, staring out the passenger window.

Graham glanced at himself as he passed a tinted car window. He looked like he usually did, a normal guy, a Mariners' fan wearing nice jeans and a gray sweatshirt stenciled with The Gap. It was a gift from Kristin. He was clean-shaven, and his eyelids didn't droop like some creep. Nor did he have a belly like those lazy slobs sucking down sodas and not caring about baseball and not even having the sense to stand up when someone needed to leave. He was just another dad who'd taken his daughter to the ballpark. He smiled and nodded at a young well-dressed couple walking past, but they didn't acknowledge him. His stomach tightened. He glared back at the couple. He flicked his cigarette butt into the street and stopped walking. His face flushed and his back tingled. His wife was somewhere else, with some new life, and no one had called him even once, not Liz's sister, or her mom, who had always seemed to liked him. Sixteen years they hadn't even called to wish him happy birthday. No card. He couldn't understand how it could just end like that. And that he had heeded her request and left her alone. He couldn't stand the thought of finding her anyway, the thought of facing a divorce after sixteen years. Instead, he was left to wonder what she meant when she said it wasn't right. What wasn't right? That she left them like that. Of course it wasn't right. She'd kissed him that day. Just a peck as he walked toward the door on his way to work, but still something, and her knowing it'd be the last.

Graham sat on a bench, rested his elbows on his thighs, and stared at some purple gum stuck in the concrete. He smoked another cigarette. Then he took off his cap and set it on his thigh. Liz had brought it home before the 1997 season had begun and he'd worn it to every game he'd attended since. And the husband at the game had on the same one. Probably half the stadium had it. It was ridiculous. It was a baseball cap, just some fabric, a cardboard bill. He should have burned it, should've burned everything that reminded him of her. He balled the cap into his fist. He felt ashamed. He stood up and forgot the bag of peanuts as he went looking for his daughter.

There was no sign of Kristin and after wandering for an hour his legs began to ache. It was dark as he walked down First Avenue. As he passed a used bookstore, he saw a small boy, about six years old, standing in the window wailing. The boy had knocked over a display of books and he was wearing a tiny pair of blue jeans, tiny sneakers, and a purple sweater. Graham stopped. As he stared inside, the boy continued to sob, as though Graham was not even there. Then the boy rammed his whole body into the glass. Graham put a finger to his lips for the boy to quiet down, but nothing happened, so he knocked once, hard on the window. The boy stopped. They stared at each other and Graham wasn't sure what to do. At the back of the shop a dull light glowed, but he saw no sign of anyone. He went to the front door and tried it, but it was locked. Of course, or the boy wouldn't be screaming. He returned to the window, where the boy remained frozen, his eyes wide.

Graham smiled at him weakly. "You'll be fine," he mouthed. The boy looked down at his feet. Then Graham noticed something move in the distance, and a woman materialized, looked in their direction. She appeared to shout something, and Graham

wondered if it was directed at him, but then she disappeared behind a bookshelf. He turned and walked on.

His silver Oldsmobile was parked under the Alaskan Viaduct. The parking spots were almost all empty now and he leaned against his car and scanned the surroundings once more for his daughter. Nothing. But he noticed someone, a man, waiting in the driver's side of a beat-up Datsun pickup. The man looked back at Graham until Graham looked away, looked down at his feet. He felt a chill and for first time that night he felt afraid that she wouldn't return. How long would he wait? Would he go to the Police?

Graham got into his car and locked the doors. He slid the key into the ignition and turned it so he could play the radio. It was ten-forty. The post-game show was on. The Mariners had held on, winning six to five. He smiled to himself, drummed his palms against the steering wheel. But he glanced again and the man was still looking and wouldn't look away. Graham took off his cap and made like he was adjusting it. Then he tossed it on the passenger seat and scratched his scalp. He reclined his own seat. He worked his hands under his head. "You'll be fine," he whispered.

Something tapping on the glass startled Graham. He sat up, saw Kristin's face peering in from the passenger side while she tapped a stone against the window.

"Open up," she said into the glass.

Graham realized that he'd drifted off. He unlocked the doors. He shielded his eyes from the dome light, but still saw the candy necklace wrapped three times around her wrist that she'd not been wearing at the game. The door closed and it was dark again. His daughter was shivering and she clutched her arms across her chest.

Graham felt a mix of relief and anger. He waited until she'd got settled, then took the keys from the ignition and stepped out of the car. He stood unsteadily, holding the door until he got his balance. The Datsun, he noticed, was gone, and he wondered when it had left. It seemed like he would have heard it. He walked behind a cement pillar to pee. He knew she wouldn't drive off without him, but he had to do something, had to show her he was hurt.

"Like I would drive off," she said, when he returned. She pulled his cap from under her thigh and handed it to him. "You're helmet."

Graham put on his cap. He unlaced his shoes and stuck the key in the ignition. It took two tries before the engine turned over, then fell into a troubled idle. He'd been meaning to take in to the shop for months. He rapped his knuckles on the dash. He switched on the radio. It was twelve-twenty.

"After you left," Graham said, backing the car into the street, "that fat woman told me I had a beautiful daughter."

"This black guy I just fucked against a motor home—he said I had nice teeth." Kristin switched on the heat.

Graham smiled his cutesy fuck-you smile, craning his head to one side. He applied the brakes. He imagined her against a motor home with a giant black man. It crossed his mind to slap her. But that was probably what she wanted—some definitive act to verify her suspicion that he was the type of person who could drive someone from the house. He could never do it anyway, he thought, as he put the car into drive.

Downtown, he brought the car to a stop at a red light on a steep hill between two skyscrapers. On the corner, two black men stood smoking cigarettes. Graham waved at

them when the light turned green and he continued toward the onramp, looking in the rearview mirror to see their reaction. They watched the car as it climbed the steep hill. Kristin did nothing. And Graham knew he was taking it too far. She was trying to shock him by saying she'd fucked a black guy. She was getting back at him for letting his cousin into the apartment. He deserved it. He knew there was no need to entirely spoil the drive back.

Graham turned up the volume on the radio. A guy with a quivering voice was going on about the great acquisition of Bret Boone, about how proud he was of the team, and how strange that no one took them seriously.

"You're right on the mark, my man," the commentator said, when the man finished.

"My god," Kristin said. She switched it off.

Graham switched it back on. They'd gone to commercial. Kristin frowned and grabbed her long hair up in her fist and began twisting it into a tight cord. "It's a bunch of lonely people faking communion," she said.

"Where'd you hear that?" He turned onto the onramp to Interstate 5. Kristin switched it to FM, found a Foreigner song.

"So who won?" she asked. She yawned.

"It was a tie," Graham said.

"I heard Edgar Martinez broke both his legs."

"Your friend told you wrong," Graham said. He wanted to know where she'd been, but he didn't ask her. He never asked where she went when she ran off.

Kristin started to finger the bracelet. She drew her wrist to her mouth and bit into one of the colored candies. It popped and a bit flew off and hit the dashboard.

"I rescued this little boy trapped in a bookstore after the game," Graham said.

"You mean a mannequin." She sat up and bit into another piece of candy. She pressed her thumbs into her thighs just above her knees and moved them in slow circles.

"He was pounding on the window. I could hear him sobbing through the window. The doors were locked though, so I had to call the cops."

"They probably thought you were pranking."

"They said thanks," Graham said. He took a cigarette and pressed in the lighter.

"You waited around for them?"

"For the first guy who showed up. He had to get a locksmith and I didn't feel like waiting around any longer. It was late. The kid calmed down when he arrived."

"Figures," Kristin said. "Can I have one of those?"

"Only if you smoke three at the same time." She hated that he smoked. He'd started two days after Liz left, after having quit for four years.

"This kid at school said you can smoke through your ass. He saw a kid do it. He said the kid could suck in air and he'd fart out smoke."

"You could do that for a science-fair project." Her legs were restless and he knew she'd fall asleep soon. "You could probably get first prize with that."

"I could win a trip somewhere," she said. "First place." She leaned her head against the window and wedged her hands between her thighs. She sighed twice. She was too young to be curled up like that against the side of the car, sighing.

After a few minutes, Kristin undid her seatbelt and leaned against his shoulder. “Goodnight,” she whispered.

“Goodnight,” Graham said. He turned the volume low so she could sleep. He could smell her strawberry-scented shampoo mingling with smoke. It was Liz’s shampoo. He had noticed she’d been using it since her mom had left. And he remembered how Liz would sleep like that when they were on long drives. They’d driven to Ashland a few times to visit her sister—he could just keep going, drive south and see if she was there.

His daughter’s drool had soaked through his sweatshirt when he pulled into their apartment complex. It was ten to one and the parking lot was full, so he turned around and parked on the street. He sat for some time, listening to the engine knock as mist coated the windshield, steam rose from the hood, and inside the windows fogged up.

“We’re here,” Graham finally whispered. He moved his shoulder lightly. Kristin twitched. She mumbled something he couldn’t understand. “We’re here,” he repeated. “We’re home.”

They lived in the Edgewood Apartments, two four-story complexes that were split by a kidney-shaped swimming pool. They’d lived there five years. Before that, they lived in a nearby complex, almost exactly the same, but split by a small garden overgrown with weeds. Liz had hated it there. She wanted a stucco house in Santa Fe with a pool and a little yard of pink stones. Graham thought the change might help, but the pool was too chlorinated, always full of leaves, and the bottom was filthy. In the winter it was covered with a tarp.

Graham followed his daughter as she trudged up the steps to the third floor. They walked past the other units to the far end, where Kristin opened the door with her key and disappeared inside. Graham waited outside and clutched the railing with one hand. The railing was cold and wet, and it was rough with flecks of chipping white paint. He shivered. He noticed something in the bottom of the lit pool that looked like a severed hand or foot. Maybe it was just a tan leather shoe, except there was something shiny about it, like it was a glass bottle. A bottle seemed most likely, but Graham thought a hand would be better. He scanned the opposing windows, and they were all darkened but one.

Inside, Kristin was using the downstairs bathroom when Graham walked into the apartment. She hadn't gone straight to bed. He was relieved. It meant she'd join him a while. He got himself a Diet Coke and sat down in his easy chair in the living room, switched on the television and changed the channel to ESPN. They were showing highlights of the Orioles-Red Sox game. He muted the volume and listened to Kristin rummage through the fridge. She poured something into a glass. He turned when she walked into the living room holding a glass of milk, heading toward the stairs.

"A little nightcap?" he asked. He smiled. It was their joke. There was no alcohol in the house, but he'd begun calling it a nightcap when they stayed up watching TV.

"I'm going to sleep."

"It's early," he said. "You just had a nap."

"It's one."

Behind her the wall was covered with floral-patterned wallpaper. To her right was a framed enlarged photograph some stranger had taken of them, as a family, standing

near Snoqualmie Falls. They all three smiled like tourists. The happy family. He had tried to take it down three months earlier, after Mitchell had told Graham he needed to let go, but Kristin wouldn't allow it. She said it had to be up when her mom returned.

"I work in the morning," she said. She'd found herself a job three weeks earlier at the Orange Julius in the mall, and she had three morning shifts, Friday through Sunday.

"You can call in sick," Graham said. He'd done worse. He'd told his boss a month earlier that Liz had cancer. He'd taken a leave of absence. He knew there was the chance he'd be caught but he didn't care, because going to work each day had become intolerable. None of his coworkers were friends and he didn't particularly like his boss. And it didn't matter—after seven years of selling steel he had it coming.

She slumped down into the couch and thumbed through the paper while Graham watched the highlights replayed silently on the TV. But after ten minutes, she stood up. It was all he would get.

"I need to sleep," she said.

"Of course," he said. "Goodnight." He watched her climb the stairs. He knew he should follow her up and go to bed, that another night sleeping in the easy chair would be too much, but he didn't move. He couldn't stand going up to his room alone.

Graham woke up in his chair. The television was still showing *Sports Center* and he couldn't understand why the same Orioles-Red Sox highlights were on. A Diet Coke was lodged between his thighs. There was the large woman at the stadium, he remembered, and she'd called him a wicked man. Her husband wore his same cap. Graham shook his head. He realized he'd fallen asleep in front of the TV, and as watched someone dive and miss a bloop single, he decided to go back to sleep. He

thought better of it. He needed to go to his own bed or Kristin would find him again in the chair in the morning. It was already morning. Graham stared at the digital clock on the bookshelf for four minutes, until it read four fourteen. He sipped from the warm soda and winced as it went down. He got up, switched off the TV, and in the dark he slumped upstairs to his room.

The little TV atop the dresser in his bedroom was on, muted, showing an infomercial of a man and a woman working vigorously on a stair-machine. There was a number to call. Kristin was asleep in his bed, on Liz's side. And in the television's glow he could see in her face his wife's forehead, her pointed chin, her mouth. Her face seemed relaxed. But she was in his bed. It meant Mitchell was in her room asleep, waiting.

Graham felt his stomach knot again. He switched off the TV. He went over and kissed his daughter's forehead. Then he took the baseball bat he kept under his bed and walked down the hall to her bedroom, not at all sure what he'd do with it. Something had to be done, but he couldn't imagine himself using it against his own cousin. He should've hated his cousin. For kissing his daughter, he should've beaten Mitchell senseless. If nothing else, he should've taken the key to the front door his cousin had had made without asking Graham's permission. Graham never should've spoken with him again. Mitchell was a mess. He was a substitute teacher, but he rarely worked, he didn't do much of anything. He was twice divorced and five years into his third marriage with a woman he despised. He was nothing.

The bedroom door was cracked open. Behind it he heard his cousin's loud steady breathing, but it didn't arouse the anger it should have. He walked into the room, closed

the door softly behind him, and stared down at the lump in the bed. Without much thought he pushed the wide end of the bat into the lump. Mitchell's hand shot out, grabbed at the bat, but Graham pulled it away, held it over his shoulder, as if ready to take a swing. But his arms were loose and he felt overcome with fatigue. He let the bat drop to his side.

"It's you," Mitchell said.

Graham switched on the light.

"What the hell?" Mitchell's voice was thick with sleep. He squinted, shielded his eyes with his large hand. He looked around the room. "Where'd Kristin go?" he asked.

"She ran off again."

"Yeah?" Mitchell sat up and yawned, then shook his head. "Shit," he muttered, and scratched his belly. He was tall and bulky. The boyishness in his face was partially hidden by a bushy mustache. "Where she'd go?" he asked in a concerned voice.

"How would I know?" Graham said. He knew Mitchell was just disappointed.

"Get out of her bed."

"But if she's not here."

"She'll come home." He nudged the bat again into Mitchell's side. "Go sleep on the couch." He left Mitchell alone in the room to dress. Downstairs, he got himself another Diet Coke. As he leaned against the couch, waiting, he stared at Liz in the photograph, trying to discern by her face if she had known then, some six years earlier, that she would leave when she thought Kristin was old enough.

Mitchell came down carrying his boat shoes and his socks, a sweater, a windbreaker. He wore a pair of khaki pants and a white tee shirt a size too small for his

thick chest. He was bare-foot and his hair stood on end. He looked down at Kristin's shoes, then looked at Graham, acknowledged that he caught the lie. "You shouldn't look at that picture like that," Mitchell said.

"Let's smoke," Graham said. He preferred when they were outside.

They both stood hunched over, silent, resting their forearms on the railing, staring down into the filthy pool. In the water, leaves floated just below the surface like drowned animals. It was drizzling. The broken water reflected off the darkened windows. Our pool, Graham thought. He imagined himself swimming in it again with Liz when they first moved in. She had to have understood that he had tried. But she'd never accused him of not trying, had never mentioned much of anything since they'd moved to the new apartment. And one day she just left.

"It looks like a hand, or a foot," Graham said. He ashed. He watched the gray cylinder float down three stories and disappear into the cement.

"It's probably one of those new class of toys or something."

"Look at it, though. Unless it's something stupid, like a shoe."

"You're just looking for evidence. You need to get beyond that." Mitchell flicked his cigarette butt and it flew in a high arc, landing with a hiss in the pool.

"People swim in that," Graham said.

"No they don't."

"Me and Kristin went swimming two days ago."

"You don't swim."

"You just avoid the bottom." But watching the butt bob along in the water, he knew his cousin was right—looking for clues wouldn't help. He needed to do something,

at least call Liz's mom, find something out. Or they could move somewhere new, try to start over. He hated to think about any of it, because the more he did, the less he knew what to do.

"What do you hear from Liz, anyway?" Mitchell asked.

Graham cleared his throat. He stood up straight, picked at the flecks of paint on his forearm. "She says she's really happy to hear you've taken such an interest in Kristin."

Mitchell snorted. "Your Mariners lose?"

"They won."

Mitchell ran both hands through his hair. "She ran off after the game?"

"Not until she came home. I was in the bathroom."

"She needs something."

"Kristin's just fine." But again Graham knew he was right. He saw his daughter calling him a shit, walking up the aisle. He saw her leave from another Sunday breakfast. Then the woman called him wicked and her husband had that cap. He saw himself asleep again in his chair.

"You should go get her that hand," Mitchell said, with a wry smile. "You should have yourself a swim. A swim would do you good."

Without giving it much thought, Graham slipped off his shoes and his socks, and the cold cement caused his whole body to convulse. But it was fine, a swim just before dawn. His cousin was needling him, sure, but Graham knew Mitchell was also trying help him get on with his life. This was part of it, he guessed, disrupting the rut. Brisk water would do him good anyway. This was a long time coming, he decided, as he

walked down the walkway without saying anything more to Mitchell. When he reached the edge of the pool he looked up at his cousin, who was leaning over the railing, grinning wildly.

“Jacques Cousteau,” Mitchell called down.

Graham smiled, turned to face the pool. “Cousteau,” he whispered, already shivering. He turned and jumped in feet first and the freezing water shocked him. He swam toward the bottom. His body felt like it was being pricked by thousands of needles. Under water, he opened his eyes but his vision was too blurred to see anything, so he groped his hand along the slimy cement until he hit something hard. He grabbed it, swam to the surface.

It was a severed hand, but it was a fake. It was hard plastic, a gag—or it was the hand of a mannequin. Someone had painted the nails silver and in a black marker they’d written OZZY across the knuckles.

“It’s a hand,” Graham said, holding it up like a torch. He was freezing. He started to sink, fluttered his free hand to stay afloat. He saw that Mitchell wasn’t standing there anymore; instead, his neighbor was peeking from her window, and when their eyes met, the young woman turned, disappeared behind the curtains. Seeing the woman in place of his cousin, he felt a dull sense of regret for having gone swimming. He realized it was pathetic, letting Mitchell talk him into it, thinking it would change anything, thinking Kristin would like whatever had ended up in the bottom of their pool. He swam to the edge and dragged himself out, slowly climbed up the stairs.

Inside, Mitchell was sitting on the couch flipping through the channels on the TV. Graham stood by the door, dripping water on the white carpet, shivering uncontrollably.

He tossed the plastic hand to Mitchell, who held it cupped in both his hands, seeming to weigh it, as if he understood something important. "She'll like this," he said. "It's been decorated." He set the hand on the coffee table so that the fingers pointed toward the ceiling. He switched off the television and grinned at Graham. Graham couldn't tell if his cousin was mocking him or not. "You went and got it."

"That was the coldest water," Graham said. His teeth wanted to chatter, but he wouldn't let them in his cousin's presence.

"They'd rather it was that way."

Graham supposed that his cousin meant the owners, too cheap to keep the pool heated. Mitchell always complained about bosses, owners, landlords. And standing there with his grinning cousin, soaking wet from a swim at five in the morning, Graham realized that in fact he'd done right. He forgot the regret he'd felt in the pool when he noticed Mitchell was gone. His neighbor could fuck herself for turning away like that. She had no idea, no sense of adventure.

"Think you'll stay?" Graham asked, not yet wanting to see his cousin go.

"I'll get going." Mitchell leaned down and pulled on his socks, slipped into his shoes.

"You're welcome to sleep on the couch."

"There's things I need to get done."

After his cousin left, Graham went upstairs into the bathroom, peeled off all his clothes, and threw them in the bathtub. He allowed his teeth to chatter. He toweled himself dry and dropped the towel on the floor. In the mirror, his body was pale and pasty, the hair on his chest already turning gray. He had a medium build, but he couldn't

help noticing how withered he looked. But tonight I did something, he thought. It didn't matter: he'd lost his wife, he was afraid of the man he was becoming.

Graham wrapped a dry towel around his waist, turned out the light, and walked into his bedroom. He took the hand with him. He set it on the floor and groped for the top dresser handle, opened it and took out a pair of boxers. He stepped into them, nearly losing his balance in the dark. He dug around for a clean tee shirt.

Dressed, Graham stood shivering, annoyed that he couldn't get warm. He went over and set the hand palm-down on the nightstand next to where Kristin's face was pressed into a pillow. The hand rocked on the oak surface, the fingers pattering before falling silent. Graham walked around to his side of the bed, slipped under the covers, and pulled them around his shoulders.

"It's just me," he whispered. He rolled onto his side, so that his back faced her.

"Did Mitchell get you to do that?" Kristin said.

"The cold water's supposed to be cleansing." He didn't want to be talking with her, hated hearing his daughter's voice then, as they lay in his bed. "You should go to sleep."

"You're the one shaking the mattress," Kristin tugged the covers lightly to her side. "You smell horrible."

"Just go back to sleep."

"Did he leave?"

Mitchell was gone, but Graham needed her to stay. "He said he was still tired. I told him it was the last time he could come over here."

Kristin rolled onto her back, pulled the covers to her chin, and stared at the ceiling. Graham couldn't stop shivering. The exhaustion prickled his entire body, it felt like ants were crawling around inside him. He would have to call in sick again. It would be the second time that week, the sixth that month, but it wouldn't matter. And though it wasn't Liz, there was someone lying next to him, no one he could curl up with, but it was someone. Graham drew his knees toward his chest and clutched the covers tight around his shoulders, but he couldn't get warm.